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THE LAND OF TIMUR



THE LAND OF TIM

RECOLLECTIONS OF RUSSIAN TURKE

BY
A. POLOVTSOFF

WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY
B. LITVINOFF
AND A MAP



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TO
N.N.
BY WAY OF DEDICATION

ONCE, long ago, we spoke of Samarcand. Afterwards I began thinking what pleasure it would give me to tell you more about my life in Turkestan.

The idea haunted me, so I jotted down some of the pictures which arose before me whenever I recalled that Paradise on Earth; and little by little the following pages were written. Of course, I realize that I had no business to misbehave in that way. I know that my English is far too clumsy, quite powerless, in fact, to describe the subtle and varied charm of Central Asia; and that these unpretending sketches are therefore sorely deficient in those merits which they ought to have possessed if they were to deal at all adequately with their subject. Excuse a foreigner. In using for my medium a language I had better have left alone, I merely thought of you and of amusing you. I aimed at making a film pass before your eyes, and

I hoped that you would not be chilled by my enthusiasm for a country which you, of all humans, would love if you knew it.

But is it still the same? It is many years now since I saw the places I describe, and in that time the immutable East has proved its mutability. The so-called Communists from Moscow have created in Samarcand an important propaganda-school for spreading revolution in Asia, and the beautiful old mosques are used, I hear, for expounding to gaping audiences the gospel of Marx. In what monstrously modernized Persian or Turkì dialect it is done, I shudder to think. And what may be the appearance of OGPU agents under the tiles and marbles of Timur's archways, I cannot imagine; Providence has spared me these sights. The Amcer of Bokhara (the son of the one I knew) is an exile, and I have no information as to what has happened and what is happening in his country. Nevertheless, I have preserved the present tense in most of these sketches. I could not help it, and I do not feel that I can alter it. My hope is that some, at least, of the beauty and originality of Russian Central Asia may, even in the hands of super-experts in destruction, not yet have been destroyed.

A. P.

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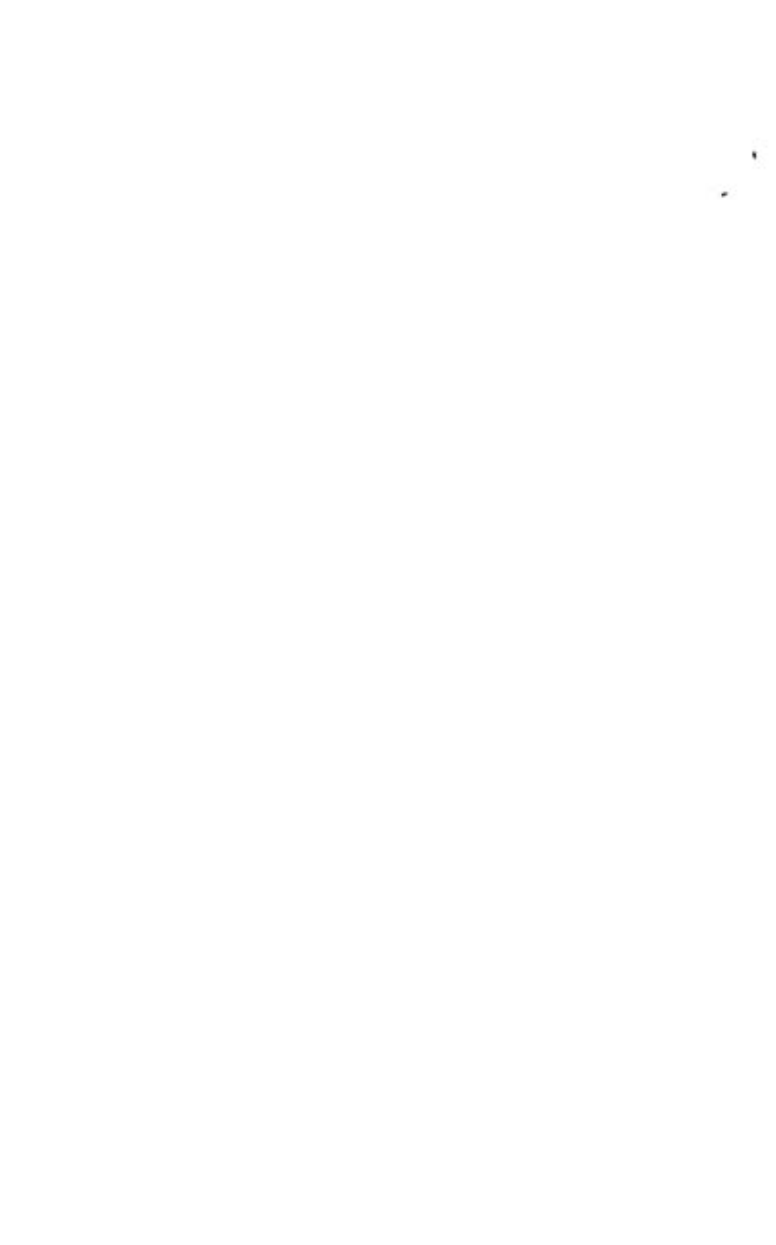
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NOTE

THIS is not a technical work. In transcribing the names of Asiatic people and places I have not considered the most correct orthography, but have tried to render as closely as possible the local pronunciation. I have, however, used 'Bokhara', because that is the form to which Western people are accustomed, though the real name is 'Booharà'.



کران تورگی شیرازی بدست ارد دیل مارا بخال هیند
و یش نهجتم سمرکند و بوخارا را

Shirazee (ah, the rogue!) take my heart in
your hand!
For one mole on your cheek I would gladly
give up
Both Bokhara and Samarcand.

—*Persian distich*



SAMARCAND

I

THE REGHISTAN MOSQUES

MILE after mile of a dreary, dusty road. Nothing but the steppe, pale grey and limitless under the full moon. The hours slip by in monotonous succession, and the frosty November night keeps me awake and shivering in my fur coat. Then something ahead: clusters of bare willows and poplars, low mud-walls, a house or two. Are these the first outskirts of the city that I have made up my mind to reach at all costs to-night? No; it is only another post-station, where three fresh horses will be harnessed to my primitive, springless carriage. There is a delay. The station-master tries to prevent my going on and insists upon arguing; he wants me to wait here till daylight, as there are suspicious characters on the road, stray workmen from the gangs which are building the railway; besides, the river ahead is swollen by the recent rains, and if my cart overturns, who will help me at such a late hour? Tiresome old man! As if his grumbling could stop me!

Again the troika jogs on through the barren waste.

Of course the river was pretty bad, and unexplained shadows did hover in too close proximity at a place where the road was broken, but they vanished at once when they saw my revolver gleaming under the bright rays of the moon. So when these foreseen accidents had been left behind, and still no city rose from out of the night, lassitude overtook me, and like the driver, whose bent and silent figure seemed more asleep than awake, I became more and more drowsy till oblivion engulfed me.

Suddenly a wonderful vision nearly made me cry out aloud. Was it a trick of my fancy? Was it solid and real, perhaps a forgotten tale out of the 'One Thousand Nights and a Night'? Or had the very soul of the hoary East clad itself in dream-like splendour to come out and greet me?

Three perfect mosques standing at right angles along three sides of an admirably proportioned square pointed their domes and their minarets towards the moon. The cool, enamelled surfaces of their portals and walls shimmered in faint blues and greens like the skin of a snake, and the silvery light ran and played over the intricate patterns of the mosaics, shrouding them in a diaphanous, unearthly haze. Towers boldly rose up to the sky; but were they actually formed of stone or brick and

fastened with mortar? There they were, standing aslant, like the towers of Pisa or of Bologna, as if deriding the ponderous laws of terrestrial matter. The haughty silence of those lofty shrines created an atmosphere of unreality, which deepened their aloofness, made them no longer human, but nearly divine. Could they have been built by mortals in order to bring mankind together for prayer? Of course not. Clearly they had been piled up out of ghostly gems by fairies or by genii, their wonderful harmony expressing in its mere lines a stronger yearning for heaven than any human works could proclaim.

There was no living thing in sight, neither man nor beast; that solitude seemed so natural to the bewildered traveller, that he expected, even while gazing at them, to feel his own cart, horses, driver melt away into nothingness; it would have seemed a matter of course, since by an inexplicable stroke of fortune dreamland had thrown open its gates before his spell-bound eyes. However, the troika still trotted on, and the exquisite buildings, remote and reticent, slowly receded into the mist as the sleepy streets of Samarcand began unrolling their walls and gardens in an endless panorama.

How many times since that magic hour have I approached the three mosques of the Reghistan! I have watched them slowly dawning on me

through bunches of acacia blossoms on a bright spring afternoon, looking pink and blue in the sunshine, as I walked nearer and nearer to them along the broad alley crowded with booths and pedlars. I have climbed all over them, studying the secrets of their gaudy tiles and of their amazing architecture. I have admired them as they stood in smiling protection over the motley and multi-coloured crowd which nestles at their feet, the life of the people playing like rippling waves against the beautiful old walls. But never again did they bare before my eyes the very essence of their mystic soul as in that first midnight vision. Then only did I see in one short, unforgettable moment that I had at least reached my goal, that nowhere else would I find, as here, the very spirit of the East.

Enchanting, puzzling, misleading Samarcand, so gay and so elegant, so sensuous at times, so ascetic at others, so delightful always and so human! In that cold, dreamy November night I caught a glimpse of your real, of your innermost being, the secrecy of your faith, the harmony of your proud orthodoxy. I saw you impervious to earthly pettiness, hovering high above human impurities, absorbed in the beauty of things eternal. All your artless creeds and your artful methods permeated my mind in a brief, lightning-lit flash. When later I learnt to love your subtle charms, I always

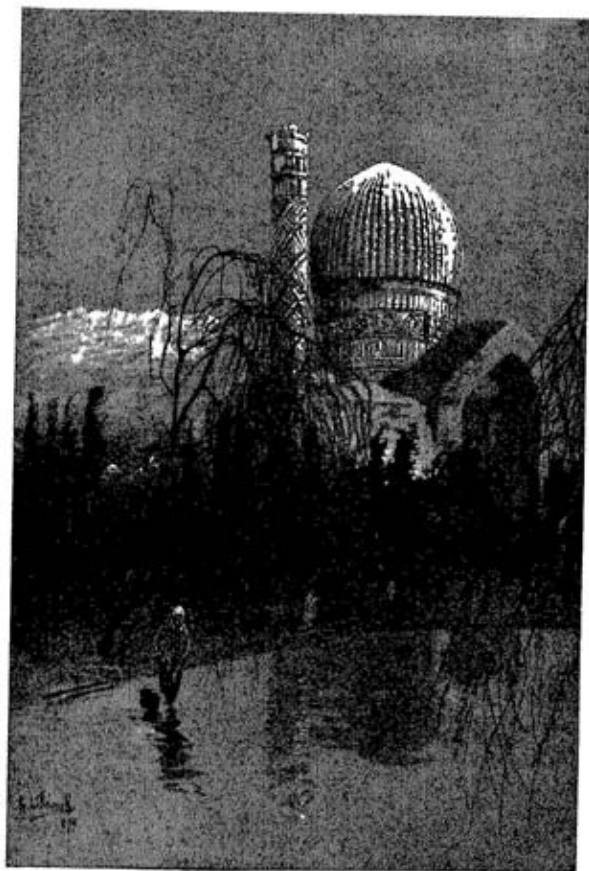
felt towards you, through that love, a silent gratitude; for when I first approached you, you were not led astray by appearances, and you refused to treat me according to my deserts, as the coarse and strange barbarian that I seemed amidst your refined and ancient splendour. Notwithstanding my ignorance, you deemed me worthy of being initiated into the very heart of your adorable mysteries; with superb tranquillity you tore the veil off my eyes, and in the solemn calmness of that radiant hour you opened for me the path of understanding, which led me up the steps of your learning and brought me to that knowledge which you alone can give.

II

THREE REMINISCENCES OF TIMUR

GOOR-AMEER : the tomb of the Ameer. In Central Asia everyone knows whom that name implies, for there has been no Ameer equal to Ameer-Timur. He was but half human, being also half divine. A ray of sun made his mother pregnant, and a planet was father to the demigod. Like Moses, like Alexander, like Jesus, like Mahomet, he was branded with the seal of the Almighty, elected for a divine mission, set apart from humanity in all ages. Though a favourite of heaven, and having the world at his feet, he chose Samarcand for his capital, and once he had taken her to his heart, he adorned her with the best that his age could yield. Beautiful mosques, built of the most precious materials; madrasas, or seats of learning, filled with ancient manuscripts; palaces and gardens, running water and orchards—all things delightful united under his able guidance to form a city of incredible charm.

In his lifetime he was nicknamed 'Timur-



GOOR-AMEER

darkness. The tombstones are set apart behind a lovely white marble railing, and correspond exactly to the graves which are in the crypt below. Timur's is not the central tomb. In his lifetime he buried in the place of honour Seyid-Shah-Barakà, a descendant of Mahomet, whom he greatly respected, and out of sheer humility reserved for himself a recess near the teacher's feet. But whereas all the other monuments are carved out of the local grey marble, Timur's grave is marked by a huge block of dark green jade, such as exists nowhere else.¹

Controversies have raged around this stone, wild guesses have been made about its origin, but till now everything connected with it has remained shrouded in deep mystery. There is no green jade in the country; nowhere in any direction for hundreds of miles. China, where jade was appreciated and worked from prehistoric times, never knew a regular jade mine from which large pieces could be extracted; the Chinese merely imported to Peking boulders which were washed out of the mountains beyond the great desert. If this monolith was found in China, by what contrivances was it brought to Samarcand? How could it have been carried over the passes from Kashgar? Even now such a feat would seem impossible to accomplish. In the

¹ It is about four feet long.

nineteenth century a similar huge rock of green jade was found, and then lost again and the way to it forgotten, somewhere in the marshes of distant Yakoutsk in North-Eastern Siberia. Could Timur's cenotaph have come from there? No human being can tell. But from the very beginning legends were woven around it, and the whole of Asia knew that a treasure adorned Timur's burial-place. So that when, towards the middle of the eighteenth century, Nadir-Shah, the conqueror of Persia and India, a capricious, grasping, ignorant tyrant, entered Samarcand at the head of his victorious army, he rushed to Timur's tomb, and, seeing the plain block of jade sparingly decorated with carved inscriptions, he had it broken in two in order to snatch away the gold which he expected to find at the heart. But once more was spirit triumphant over matter. There was no hiding-place and no gold. The stone was but a symbol of moral treasures, of mental refinement, no prey for gross appetites; and the puzzled barbarian marched shamefacedly away without realizing how the shadow of a great age had turned his ignorant greed to derision. Pious hands brought the two halves of the block together again, and only a slight crack now recalls the profanation perpetrated by Nadir-Shah.

The walls all around are clothed with slabs of a

semi-transparent alabaster, worked in hexagons so that they convey the impression of polished fish-scales; and above this panelling, a coating of white gypsum, cut and carved in patterns which correspond to the architectural profiles of the edifice, rises up into the dome. The whole scheme of decoration creates an atmosphere of cool and calm repose, serene and peaceful. Doves come in through the window palings, and their gentle cooing and short flights to and fro over the pots of fragrant basil which stand about deepen the impression of aliveness. Timur's resting-place is by no means a forgotten and dreary ash-heap. Nature surrounds it with her most graceful manifestations and seems to weave them into a network connecting the past and the present.

All about the mosque and its garden, native houses hum with the noise of everyday labour, and if one takes the trouble to climb up on to one of their flat roofs, the pointed, turquoise-blue cupola of Goor-Ameer rises solemnly before one's eyes, so near, yet so remote, above the dense foliage of enormous weeping willows. It is a magnificent sight. Whether it is seen against a deep blue summer sky, when the willows are thick with pale leaves; or against a background of grey winter clouds, when the bare branches are like delicate wickerwork; or at night under a sky of deep velvet;

or at sunset amidst a gorgeous display of orange light—at all times that enamelled dome, so superbly outlined, so beautifully poised, so full of grace and dignity, seems a mute and eternal guardian of splendid traditions.

Having learned to love and to admire the great prince's tomb, I undertook two pilgrimages to more distant spots connected with him: to the place where he was born and to the place where he died.

He saw the light of day in a part of Kesh known as Shahr-i-Sabz, the 'Green City', now a quiet provincial town in the Khanate of Bokhara. There is no railroad anywhere near; a primitive conveyance takes one over the mountains to the prosperous-looking valley, where Shahr-i-Sabz is scattered about in a haphazard way. It was always a small place, but as it had been his cradle, Timur out of gratitude took the trouble to adorn it with fine buildings, some remnants of which are still extant. He erected several mosques, which successive earthquakes overthrew, and which lesser men than he rebuilt in their own way. In three of them, which are now modest, whitewashed, village prayer-houses, charming wooden carved doors have been hooked on to new hinges, and testify by their intricate workmanship that they belonged originally to constructions of a different artistic type. However,

Shahr-i-Sabz's chief monument was Timur's palace, commemorating his birthplace. It was a huge brick pile overlaid with enamelled tiles, parts of which are still able to show what the original house was like.

According to the immutable custom of Central Asia, the local chieftain, whatever his title may be—Khan, Ameer, or what not—lives in a 'kalah' or 'fortress'; in other words, on the highest part of the locality, where, behind walls and doors, arms can be stored, soldiers housed, and from whence an attack may be repulsed with less risk than in the open. Timur's palace followed the usual rule. It has remained till now the residence of the Bokharan governor or beg, though, of course, this official no longer inhabits the lofty halls of yore, for those halls are all crumbling to pieces; less attractive, but perhaps more comfortable houses have sprung up inside the ancient enclosure to shelter the men of to-day.

The ruins of the palace rise up in unexpected nooks. Vast expanses of brickwork, all glittering with coloured tiles, suddenly stand out, half overgrown with vegetation, amidst the orchards and the kitchen gardens of the garrison. One large room is nearly entire. It has no roof, of course, and no ceiling, but the walls rise in some parts almost to the cornice, and it requires little imagination to

complete the whole of the enamelled decoration. The tiles are mostly blue, dark like sapphire or light like turquoise—hues which no modern ceramist is able to create. Very often patterns in those two blues are woven into the ordinary brick of the country, which is a pinkish grey, and the harmony produced by the blending of the three colours is enchanting.

The scanty remains of the proud palace, with the life of the citadel drifting gaily over them, make up an attractive and characteristic picture of the East, where nobody troubles either to repair or to pull down. If old things tumble to the ground—poor old things made for the needs of former days—there they may as well lie, until eventually destruction, fatal and inevitable, overtakes them. Why think about them? Why spend time and labour over them? Life steps on, hardly noticing their presence. So it is in *Shahr-i-Sabz*, where the glory of Timur's palace is slowly reverting to dust amidst the picturesque and careless crowd which lives upon its ruins.

If Timur's cradle is yet full of smiles, his death-bed, Otrar, is one of the most tragic spots it has been my fate to see.

At one time Otrar was a prosperous town, and when the aged monarch was suddenly seized by

illness during one of his numerous campaigns, he had himself carried there and died. That happened in 1405. Later on the Yaxartes, on whose banks the city lay, capriciously altered its course over the steppe, or was perhaps turned aside by a cunning invader, and from that moment Otrar was doomed. Having no longer a water supply, the city perished from thirst.

Now nothing remains. The mud or mud-brick houses have become common earth again, and for miles and miles one treads on a mixture which is half soil and half potsherds. Small bits of pottery painted in every possible colour lie everywhere. They all spell destruction, ruin, waste; the debris of successive centuries, conflicting civilizations, the simple plate of the poor man and the refined goblet of the grandee—all lie mixed together and smashed to atoms. There is no water anywhere, no vegetation of any sort, except perhaps some tufts of prickly thorn which only camels condescend to munch; the scorching sun and the desert wind have it all to themselves. The brilliant specks of former bowls and flagons remind one incessantly that here human effort was overcome by the irresistible pressure of inanimate forces. It looks as though a curse had fallen on the spot where Timur died. No life could sprout forth again where that great life was extinguished, and only

innumerable fragments of what men once created stare up at the pitiless sky from a wilderness through which no human being ever passes; where no one can even read the tragedy of their dumb dispersal.

Samarcand secured for herself the priceless relic of Timur's body, and here alone is his memory alive. In truly Oriental fashion, both his birthplace and his deathplace have been forgotten; whereas near the exquisite sanctuary of his resting-place the faithful servant for ever stands and prays over the ashes of the great Timur.

III

ZIKR

WHEN the Arabs invaded Persia and Turkestan in the seventh century of our era, they imposed the yoke of Islam on the conquered races. Their dry, abstract, Semitic mentality was, however, so different from that of the Iranian people, that the latter developed their own form of Moslem religion, and at present the Persians are Shiah. But not so all Persian-speaking tribes. Turkish blood is always inclined to follow the rigid orthodoxy of the Arab. No matter what political changes and divisions succeeded each other in the long wars that raged in Central Asia, Bokhara and Samarcand remained staunch adherents of the Sunni faith. Nevertheless, the proximity of Persian mysticism had a decisive influence over the whole of that country, and Sufism, with its allegorical teachings, strongly reacted on the doctrine of the local divines. The result was that many sects sprang up in Central Asia, and they go on flourishing, for religion in

this part of the world has lost none of its mediaeval power. But as these sects are born and bred in the very bosom of orthodoxy, no taint of heresy clings to them, and their adepts do not differ outwardly from their purely Sunni countrymen. Their gatherings, or 'zikrs', being a form of worship, find shelter in one of the mosques, not in a special or separate building, and they bear no character of secrecy. Anyone is welcome to them, if he wishes or happens to drop in. Who knows but that in taking part in the common prayer with the initiated he may not be touched that very night by the divine grace and immediately join the fraternity?

Samarcand possesses an admirable mosque called Shah-i-Zindah, 'The Living Shah', with a legend attached to it: the saint, Kussam-ibn-Abbas, whose tomb is the chief ornament of the place, is not really dead, but only concealed, and when the divine bidding reaches him, he will come forth and again be a teacher of men. The mosque is perched on a hill, and a long path leads up to it. One passes first under a majestic portal, then up flights of steps, higher and higher, to the house of prayer. The way is between two walls that are not really walls, for they are all cut up into short stretches which connect a series of small buildings on both sides of the corridor: irregularly placed and

gorgeously decorated monuments, tombs or shrines erected by pious men of the fifteenth century as memorial or votive offerings. One of them is all colours of the rainbow; another is a monochrome of turquoise-blue tiles elaborately carved with floral scrolls and signed by the artist, a native of Herat, somewhere about 1415. The whole walk up to the principal mosque is like a dream; one feels caught in the meshes of a spell, and each step brings one to a new vista of the beauty which encompasses one all around. Nothing grand nor solemn; just little graceful domes and arches, displaying their admirable hues and touched, alas, by the sorry decay of age: a vision of elegant caducity full of melancholy meaning.

The saint's tomb is in a final mosque, quaintly situated on the right of the passage where it runs up against a high barrier, the limit of the enclosure. This sanctuary is a perfect gem, small but charmingly proportioned, and the monument which it contains, hidden by layer upon layer of precious brocades, is drowned in mysterious darkness as the sunlight reaches it from on high, through stained glass sparingly set in beautiful gratings.

At the entrance, under the grand portal, stands a separate hall used as a *ruk* for Friday-prayer, but likewise doing duty for the meetings of a mystic sect, the *Naksh-Bendi*.



SHAH-I-ZINDAH



Unlike most other sects, whose zikrs take place in the day-time, the Naksh-Bendi come together each Thursday night, and one by one squat down on the floor, where for a time they remain enrapt in meditation. Their ishan, or spiritual chief, sits facing the congregation with two or three acolytes at his side. A professional singer starts reading in a high falsetto voice, which seems perpetually on the verge of breaking down; his text is usually a version of some sacred legend which is intended to turn the minds of the faithful towards contrition or absorption in the Deity. Such men are engaged just to create an atmosphere, and those thin voices of theirs are much appreciated, especially when they are very loud, very tremulous, and shaken by inflexions which are almost sobs. I believe their services are often secured at a high price. The congregation is composed of all sorts and conditions of men, poor carriers from the bazaars as well as rich and smartly dressed tradesmen; for Islam recognizes no fundamental differences in humanity; before God all are equal. Their emotions manifest themselves in precisely the same way, and the pathos of the chanted recital draws sighs from the breasts and tears from the eyes of rich and poor alike.

When the ishan feels that the audience has reached a certain pitch of ecstasy, he waves the reader aside and shouts out a few of the names of

God in a definite and swinging formula. It is like a wind in the rushes. All the assistants spring up, as if moved by an electric shock, join hands, and then, shouting the words which the ishan has uttered, they go on repeating them in an endless litany, and dance heavily to the measure of their song. The mosque is of a sudden filled by a chain of men in a trance, howling and prancing, praising the Almighty in wild yells. Some of them go on, oblivious of earthly life; others, overcome by repentance, tear their clothes from their bodies, hammer on their bare chests with their fists, rend the air with their cries, while tears trickle down their faces. Turbans roll off on all sides; the ample robes of the East fly about in a mad procession.

There is nothing theatrical about it, nothing prepared or pre-arranged as in the ballet of whirling Dervishes at Constantinople, and, of course, no hint of a performance, no eye to a possible spectator. It is each time an improvisation, sincere and self-centred, entirely unconnected with the surrounding world; the mystic explanation of the revolving progress being that it is an allusion to the planetary system.

From time to time the ishan, who has never risen from his seat on the floor, gives a new impulse to the dance by shouting a new sentence of worship,

set in other words and marked by a new scale of notes. The audience, amazingly receptive to his outcry notwithstanding the deafening din, at once follows his lead and alters the swing of its motion.

I have sometimes stood against a pillar watching the mass of shrieking and leaping humanity for a whole night, till my head swam and I was no longer quite sure whether I was merely a silent witness, or whether, on the contrary, it was not I who was howling, as though in a nightmare, and blindly struggling through a dense crowd of sweating bodies. Hour after hour slips by with no other difference than the periodical change of measure in the beat of the terrible stampede.

At the first break of daylight the ishan, by a sudden gesture, dispels the hallucination. All stand up for a moment as though frozen, then collapse with him in the performance of morning prayer. It is all over; the breath of the spirit has blown and gone; life, simple, common, everyday life, returns to its own.

After a general shuffle of feet with soft leather boots into corresponding mud-shoes, the ishan with elaborate civility ushers me out into the rosy dawn and asks me to share his breakfast in a garden close by. We both squat on a rug near a clear rivulet and breathe in the pure air over our pale green tea and scones of unleavened bread.

No more stamping of frenzied feet around us; only the fresh notes of the lark's song pouring down from the sky. No more close heat from writhing human bodies; only the fragrance of mint and basil which my host politely crushes between his palms, in order that the morning breeze shall bring their scent over my face. While around shines the radiant clearness of a new day of rest and leisure, for it is Friday, the Sabbath of Islam.

I can hardly believe that this old man opposite me is the same one whom I have just watched through a long night directing a crowd of shouting maniacs by the inflexions of his voice, for now he is urging me in gentle tones to another cup of tea. Has this night put no strain on his mind, that he can calmly admire the rising sun and remember to quote appositely some verses from Hafiz? Or was the whole pandemonium of the zikr merely a delusion of my diseased brain?

But what is the use of bothering about questions and replies in a country where powerful contrasts ought not to be taken as puzzles, but as, at the utmost, an additional spice in the banquet of life?

IV

CHEEHEL-DOOKHTARON

CHEEHEL-DOOKHTARON, meaning 'Forty Maidens', is one of those ancient names which crop up unexpectedly in various parts of Central Asia. It is connected with a very old and rather confused legend about forty beautiful ladies. The legend seems to be ubiquitous, for there are many Chechel-Dookhtarons, and it is really not possible to believe that the same maidens experienced adventures in localities so wide apart without their number of forty having ever been subjected to variations. However that may be, the traveller who meets with the name may be sure that he has come to a place where human life has been going on for many centuries, and that he may hit upon vestiges of a distant age somewhere close by.

As I was once loitering on the Reghistan, in the very centre of Samarcand, the familiar sound of Chechel-Dookhtaron caught my attention, and upon making inquiries, I learnt that the spot con-

separated to the forty ladies was round the corner. This seemed rather unexpected, as the Reghistan is one of the great arteries of popular life, not at all the sort of half-abandoned, out-of-the-way locality that one would associate with legends. Three sides of it are bounded by three mosques; the history of each of them is well known, and is entirely unconnected with the forty maidens. The fourth is bordered by a row of fruit booths.

If the first three sides of the square are splendid, the fourth is delightful, and even to the superficial glance of a passer-by its beauty is ever changing with the season of the year and rich with endless attractions. On the first days of April it greets spring with baskets of the round early apricot, greenish, with a rosy spot on one cheek. In May it turns crimson with strawberries and cherries. In June and July come successively the numerous varieties of the orange apricot; melons with green rind and white flesh, or yellow inside and out; purple and honey-coloured figs; peaches of all shades from greenish white to dark red; raspberries, currants and gooseberries; pale green water-melons full of a pink crisp substance which melts to nectar in the mouth; greengages and those odd kinds of local plums which are akin to cherries; and grapes, the different varieties of which are nearly endless. Then, towards autumn, come apples and pears,



FRUIT BOOTHS



pomegranates and quinces. At last, when winter is on and the orgy of bright colours has vanished from the stalls, come the browns, dark purples, dull greens and greys of the huge jars and baskets of dried fruit, of pistachios, of nuts and almonds, of raisins, of all sorts of preserves and jams; while overhead hang in their nets of reed-wisps those late winter melons which become really ripe and sweet after weeks and weeks of dangling from the ceiling, where they look like ostrich eggs in a shop of doubtful Oriental curios. Meanwhile, in front of the booths there is a perpetual buzz of customers, never hurried nor self-absorbed, but always leisurely and genial, ever ready for a chat with the shopman or with each other; for though every one of them is full of information about the latest topic of excitement, he is perfectly content to hear more about it.

So on that particular afternoon, after I had repeatedly yielded to the many temptations of the fruit-shops and had discussed for a long time the comparative merits of various kinds of melons (which are *the* fruit to any lover of Central Asia—beyond comparison with mere peaches or grapes), I suddenly heard of the proximity of a Cheehel-Dookhtaron. I asked at once whether I might be shown the way to it. But this was not so simple as I had thought at first, for it involved slipping in between native houses, where the female part of the

dwellers had to be warned that a stranger was about to pass, so that they could retire, or at least pull down their veils; besides, the place itself belonged to an old lady, and she had to be asked whether she objected to my intrusion. After some voluble exchange of opinions over the matter, it was all settled satisfactorily, and I wandered down a narrow alley in the cool shade of the houses. The elderly dame brought me to a gate which she unlocked, and then led me into her kitchen garden.

A graceful, half-ruined archway, still glittering with ancient tiles, did duty for a portal to what had probably been a small mosque, though now hardly anything remained of its walls. The pavement, however, was still there, and on it were scattered beautiful tombstones all carved with floral patterns and Arab letters. The masonry had discouraged any possible attempt at growing carrots or beans in that corner, so that the stones were practically untouched, and their inscriptions yielded the information that this was the burial-place of a number of Sheibani-Khan's relations. Here it was that they lay, those savage princes, the followers and companions of the masterful chief, who for so long was the foe of the great Babur. In A.D. 1500 Sheibani invaded Samarcand, and before the pressure of his troops Babur had to flee, never to return again. He left his favourite sister in the

hands of his enemy, and after that for many years they never stopped waging war on each other till Sheibani returned to the mercy of God and Babur became Emperor of India.

All those brilliant young Ameers and Vizirs who surrounded the Khan, and whose wild lives we can only imagine, knowing so few details about them, lay there around me under their delicately carved monuments, while the old lady went on explaining, half apologetically and very profusely, that it was a pity, of course, to lose that corner of good soil for her vegetables, but that at her time of life it would be too much trouble to cart away the stones. And I stood half-dreaming, scarcely attending to the old hag's words, as a vision of Sheibani's camp rose before my eyes. I was obsessed with the image of those elegant bandits in snow-white turbans, with bejewelled daggers stuck in their gorgeous belts and curved swords in their hands, galloping among the terror-stricken population of the town on that terrible September afternoon, when ample bloodshed followed victory. Now they were stretched under that pavement, their very bones rotting back to dust; to-morrow, perhaps, even their names would be wiped out beyond recollection by the crazy whim of an obscure peasant woman. As it was, all memory of the manly virtues which they had embodied was gone,

and by a mockery of fate their family vault, the resting-place of warriors, had had the name of the forty legendary damsels attached to it. What a miserable downfall! Four centuries had passed over them, and though probably many of their descendants were still swarming about, their posterity retained no notion of such forefathers having ever existed.

How intense the irony of life and death can sometimes appear, and how strong is its hold on a mind which has hit upon it peradventure! A stray word or two, a short walk away from the turmoil of the bazaar, and I had suddenly enjoyed one of the most poignant contrasts which history could offer. Seldom did I feel as at that moment the mystery of Samarcand. The seemingly careless city holds jealously guarded secrets secluded in every nook. Who knows them? Who can guess them? She keeps them to herself, and if you want to be initiated into one of them you must first court the capricious magician. Perchance, owing to some fancy of hers, a ray of favour may descend upon you; then scales drop from your eyes, you take the right turning and the commonest lane in the maze brings you unexpectedly to a vision of vanished ages; in a few strokes a picture of former glories dawns upon your startled senses and shows you the hidden meaning of life. It is no use

striving to create those unforgettable chances. For days and days you may roam about with no fairy to guide you. Suddenly, tired of teasing you, Samarcand may choose to treat you like a spoilt child: all at once she may draw aside for your enjoyment one of her veils. But after each new run of luck you go on pining for more, love-stricken and hungry; for those who have been admitted to a taste of her enchantments are her slaves for ever.

V

HODJA-AKHIRAR

HODJA-AKHIRAR is a most celebrated shrine, but the way to it is very long—miles and miles of a dusty lane which winds in and out of imaginary obstacles for no apparent reason. Who knows, however, if the straight line is not, perhaps, the wrong one for a road to follow? What delightful places would remain screened away and unknown to the traveller who hurries on the way in which the silly crow flies! Hodja-Akhrar expects no travellers, but only pious pilgrims; and maybe the winding lane is intended to purify their souls with a display of beauty before letting them approach the holy spot; for what journey could be more soothing to the mind than that seemingly casual stroll through the belt of gardens which encircles Samarcand? They are orchards really, but as those to whom they belong stay in them as long as possible each time they come to gather the ripe fruit, the orchards have slowly been turned into resorts of pleasure. Lightly built summer-houses have

sprung up in unexpected places, flowers have been planted or sown, trees have been encouraged which, though they bear no fruit, yield some kind of comfort or enjoyment; and little by little the lane has taken to meandering through a sort of poet's bower, infinitely varied in its picturesque disorder, in which one feels that at every turning a fantastic procession may appear from between the tree trunks and seem perfectly in place—the Queen of Sheba, perhaps, with long strings of laden camels and gorgeously attired slaves, or Ali-Baba, with the complete set of oil-jars carried on stout poles.

As I followed the fairy lane for the first time, under a grey autumn sky, I felt the whole atmosphere permeated by a mixture of reality and magical possibilities. The orchards were empty; every one of their fruits had long since been plucked and carted away; the carved gateways were closed. No sounds floated in the air, except the chirping of birds; and it seemed so strange that there was no living soul anywhere to take in all this beauty. Shutters covered the teashops which stood here and there at the road-side; the gaily painted verandas which peeped through the foliage were empty and mute; no heads with exquisitely coloured turbans popped out of the branches to gaze at the traveller and give him greeting. Could that charming labyrinth be there for nobody's joy? As I passed

the sleepy gardens I felt as if in each of them happiness might be in hiding. Perchance it was there, tremulously expecting the bold man who would seek it out and snatch it to himself; but a pilgrim's progress has to be steady and unflinching, so I looked for no other happiness than that which the venerable saint might grant me. And suddenly, amidst the dreamy, drowsy gardens, I hit upon the right turning and came straight to the shrine.

Here also the vegetation runs riot. The holy man's tomb is overshadowed by lofty elms and poplars, and the usual offerings of yaks' tails and ibex horns stand or lie between the fig trees and pomegranate bushes, while small votive rags flutter in the breeze from many a branch around. To whom were all these prayers addressed? As usual in this country, the actual facts of the saint's life are dimmed by a haze of legend. The one thing which the devout pilgrim knows is that the Hodja, whose intercession he comes to seek, was a very great saint who lived long ago, became famous for his contempt of worldly pleasures, and is now in the bosom of the Almighty: a most excellent position from which to shower down benefits upon applicants.

The tomb is naturally the true goal of the pilgrimage, and on that calm afternoon it looked a most appropriate ending to the journey; the garden



HODJA-AKHRAR, THE SAINT'S TOMB



around felt so quiet and restful, so full of pious concentration. A solitary guardian was the only human being in view, and after a chat with me he led the way through an ancient arched doorway into the ruined mosque close by. It is a madrasa really, a seat of learning, three sides of the oblong court being bordered by a two-storied building composed of rooms for the students, some of whom were walking about.

One man, more talkative than the rest, after the usual exchange of greetings, began speaking to me, and asked me to come up and have a cup of tea. His room, one of several scores of similar cells facing each other, was very simple, not to say poor: whitewashed walls, a straw mat on the mud floor, a mattress and bedding in the corner, a small wooden trunk for spare clothes, a shelf for the teapot and cups, a few books and a three-stringed guitar made up the entire list of its contents. My host told me that his school had much degenerated from its pristine glory and was no longer rich enough to keep up a large number of pupils. In the Islamic East learning is not paid for; it is given freely to those who consecrate themselves to it. Wealthy men erect and endow madrasas, and on the revenues of the college live the students, who in that way can wholly devote themselves to the sciences and never be troubled by the necessity of

earning their bread.

Hodja-Akhrar is slowly sinking to decay, for poverty and ruin are gnawing at the venerable school; its inmates are few, and their beautiful abode is falling to pieces. The blue-tiled sentences which run over the walls lack many a letter of their bold cufic script, and on the pavement round the central fountain tiles of all colours strew the ground.

On the fourth side of the courtyard is a mosque, rather late in style and decoration—sixteenth or perhaps even seventeenth century—but lovely nevertheless. Many of its beauties have perished, but the grand portal is still extant and covered, as of yore, with vivid and tender hues such as the more sober taste of the fifteenth century refrained from using; pink and yellow, purple and green blend over its surface with the classic turquoise and sapphire of earlier days. It seems as if the great flat wall, proudly erect amidst its faded surroundings, were kept up by some invisible hand as a relic or a portent. What superb spirit inhabits it?—one to whom time is nought? In the long, transparent moonlit nights, when the cool beauty of the huge portal stares unflinchingly at the sky, do not all those charming painted fragments, lying in a heap at its foot, appear to be the corpses of wild prayers hurled through mid-air to the ghost of a former period by souls yearning to see his return,

and then rejected by him implacably and tossed to the ground? For if the spirit is there in seclusion, he knows for a certainty that symbols may remain, but that once an epoch has withered and died, no powers can revive it; for in things human there is no exact repetition, but always new combinations of old elements, an endless variety of new beginnings which pitilessly sweep away the empty shells of former lives when the time for their own self-expression is ripe. Hodja-Akhrar in its wilderness seems full of a sense of revolt against such a cruel order of things; discontent and disapproval of the ways of the world seem to pervade it. Diffident of the present and of its methods, the proud mosque hides away in a corner and clings jealously to the remnants of a past which no hand will ever restore.

VI

SAMARCAND AT NIGHT

THE gay and gaudily dressed crowd which throngs the bazaars in the day-time vanishes at night into privacy, a privacy more complete than any the West has ever known. The houses have no windows, nothing but grey, blank mud-walls; and even when an entrance-door happens to be open, the only thing a passer-by may see beyond it is a black hole, for this first passage is invariably built at an angle, so that no glimpse may be had of the interior. Womankind never goes about unveiled, the veil being of horsehair, dense and stiff like cardboard, nor without the shroud of a grey cloak worn over the head, the sleeves dangling empty; so that in the street all ladies look alike, and go about as if clad in boxes. A house door may be open or closed, that matters little; it is only a door and nothing else. It never becomes an opportunity for delightful developments; it is never the place where exciting gossip may be exchanged, or an interesting acquaintance-

ship picked up; never, oh! never the cradle of romance. Street-life is wholly centred in the bazaars; all the other streets have none of it. They wind about between continuous walls, the monotony of which is only broken by wooden entrances perpetually locked. No one lingers on a bench, for there are no benches. No one dawdles near his or her doorstep, for such a thing, even if it did exist, would never convey to anyone's mind the possibility of using it as a connecting link with the rest of humanity.

Every good rule is relieved by at least one exception, however, and in Samarcand (the Fates have so willed it) exceptions are all grouped in a cosy corner. Here the least observant of wayfarers is at once struck by the unusual look of things. At night the doors are not closed, but stand ajar; from behind them lights radiate into the darkness, and stealthy figures, but half-shrouded and hardly veiled, make it manifest that here not only is a rigid husband's jealousy out of the question, but that even propriety, as the Moslem world understands it, is scattered to the winds.

Take your chance and follow a beckoning finger. You step at once into a fairy realm of graceful dolls, where all values seem to be reversed and many missing. Are they human beings, those who come to greet the foreigner? Of course not. They are

dear little inmates of an exotic aviary, parakeets or humming-birds, earthly-paradise birds perhaps, noisy, laughing, teasing, chatting, whimsical creatures. They look like women with their faces rouged, their eyebrows painted into a straight black line, nails henna'd so as to imitate carnelians, long ear-rings of balas rubies and seed-pearls dangling from under raven-black locks, big silver rings studded with turquoise and coral on all their fingers, and an endless variety of the most tender, the most striking, the most vivid colours, not of the rainbow, but of the dyer's art, mixed up in the silken clothes which rustle at each of their delicate gestures; but never does a painful opposition of crimson and scarlet offend the eye, never a harsh or vulgar association of tints mar the picture. This kingdom of daintiness is ruled by the ancient harmonies of Oriental colouring, which are innate in all living creatures born on the soil of Asia.

The visitor is offered sweets in endless varieties, and they seem the natural food of this land of honeyed, almost cloying, prettiness. Of course there is nothing human about it. Charming and soulless, sometimes lovely, but always uninteresting, it is a made-up thing, a toy, the realities of which are all on a different plane.

If the wayfarer thinks one of the brilliant company more attractive than the rest, the compliment

will be received with greater appreciation than he expects. Not only will an aged mamma be called in to bring fresh tea and to admire the guest, but even very tiny brothers and sisters will toddle in at the hostess's bidding, that she may show him off to them; and this making friends with the whole family creates a ridiculous though easy-going conviviality, perfectly topsy-turvy, but quite homely.

No squalor, no perversity, no suffering are apparent—they would be out of place in this universe of the unreal; nothing but a doll's house, full of elaborate playthings, where an oversugared and superficial oblivion of everyday existence pervades a special atmosphere devoid of any morality, any feeling, any deep human note.

It is delightful, but, after all, rather like the parrot-house at the Zoo.

VII

BIBI-KHANUM'S MADRASA

BIBI-KHANUM was the name of one of Timur's sisters, to whom the great monarch was deeply attached. She died before reaching an advanced age, and Timur's grief at her loss was boundless. He buried her in Samarcand, and beside her mausoleum (now, alas! shorn of all its beauty) he decided to build another monument to her memory, which should be a thing of both moral and physical beauty for ever. In the very centre of the bazaars he erected the madrasa which bears her name. He assembled all the most refined productions which the art of his age could create. Tradition will have it that he engaged the best workmen from distant countries for carrying out his plans. Priceless materials were lavishly used: the massive entrance-doors were coated with silver embossed and engraved; rare marbles enhanced every corner of the precincts; admirable rugs covered the pavements; gold lamps, enriched with precious stones, hung from the vaults; elaborately bound

books, exquisitely written by the best calligraphers of the day and illustrated by the most renowned miniaturists, were kept in the library. Hundreds of students prospered in this seat of learning, and its fame flew far and wide.

Alas! That very luxury for which the madrasa was celebrated has perhaps been the chief cause of its undoing. The riches of Bibi-Khanum's school and mosque tempted every conqueror through the dark ages of strife and war which desolated Central Asia for so many generations; and then earthquakes completed the destruction which human hands had begun. The huge pile is still erect in most of its parts, towering high above the flat-roofed native houses; but its portal is gone, its beautiful blue dome is all cracked and sunken, the stately courtyard is surrounded by half-ruined walls, the pupils' cells stand open to every storm; and large trees, spreading their roots under the pavement, lift up the flagstones and overturn them, whereby an atmosphere of picturesque disorder is added to the empty husk of Timur's great work of art. It has now become a skeleton, pathetic in its grim vacuity. Only one eloquent detail remains to proclaim the scale of its former importance: in the central axis of the yard an immense Koran-table is left untouched.

It is cut out of a block of marble and covered with delicately carved floral patterns, its form being that

of the ordinary book-stand in Central Asia, shaped to support a volume half-open. Whoever could have written a Koran which required such a stand? What can have been the actual size and weight of the manuscript when a grown-up man can stretch out at full length in the hollow prepared for the back of its binding? And by what grace of Providence has this one lovely table been spared to remind ignorant generations that Bibi-Khanum's madrasa was a repository from which the Spirit of God sent forth its rays? Greedy barbarians have torn away all its treasures, have cut to pieces and destroyed its perishable beauty; but the symbol of learning, the pillar of abstract truth has survived through all those terrible vicissitudes, to tell those who are attentive and able to understand that Timur's foundation was but a piously decorated frame made for housing a radiance of mind—infinitely more precious than all the blandishments of matter.

The lonely splendour of Bibi-Khanum's madrasa is still far more striking by night than by day. Nights in Central Asia are, as a rule, different from those elsewhere, owing to the extreme dryness and clearness of the air. There the sky seems nearer to earth, and the stars are much larger and brighter. As there is very seldom any wind at Samarcand, those warm summer nights convey an impression

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BIBI-KHANUM'S MADRASA

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of something quite apart, of a divine harmony of nature where all things celestial closely participate in terrestrial matters. In that magical atmosphere I never approached the gaunt outline of Bibi-Khanum's shrine without a definite feeling of awe. The pinkish-grey walls stand out against an intensely dark sky, the blue dome is as if cut out of an enormous turquoise, the details of the architecture merge in a general air of self-restrained and reticent desolation. The light of the moon pours all over the high bare walls and reveals in them new values and new charms, undetected in the glare of day. The belts of inscriptions running through the brickwork, the sparsely used, dark blue borders, the dots of enamel which cunningly punctuate the masonry—all these details acquire another sense. By day they are little more than spots of colour which the architect used in order to throw forward some of the reliefs, or else to add depth and softness to the even paste of flat planes. By night they are alive with new meanings. As the silvery moonlight slips over them at certain angles they shine like sparks of some unearthly fire which breaks forth through the dim rosy surfaces and makes the immense edifice still truer to itself. It is not merely the decayed remnant of a great artist's conception, but truly a jewel dropped on to earth from above, whose very essence

is permeated with spiritual influences, and whose fragments, however spoilt or smashed, go on proudly proclaiming the supremacy of the mind, whatever clay it may deem fit to animate.

Bibi-Khanum's school appears to many eyes as but a pitiful wreck, and not even a very important wreck, perhaps, now that imagination and memory have to do so much to reconstruct the image of the past from out of the present dilapidation. But if it were to vanish entirely in the shock of a new earthquake, Samarcand would no more be the same, for its greatest torch of spiritual light would be extinguished for ever.

VIII

BAZM

A BEATING of tambourines, with at regular intervals the outbreak of a staccato cadenza, on a general background of humming murmur; then a high falsetto chant, ever more and more insistent; sometimes an accompaniment of stringed instruments, weaving quite independently their tenuous cobweb of melody in quarter-tones so as to complete and deepen by contrast the ecstasy of sound which pours forth from the tightly stretched goatskins. . . . When at the hour of sunset such music strikes your ears, you may be sure that somewhere close by there is a 'bazm', the favourite ballet performance of the East.

It is a ballet unlike ours, for the women may only dance in the seclusion of their homes to amuse themselves and their friends; in the bazm which men may see, the performers are exclusively boys. The staging is by no means elaborate. A space is cleared, maybe in a room, more commonly in a garden or a yard, and covered with a rug or rugs,

very often with felt mats, for on these monochrome surfaces, white, grey or crimson, the bare feet of the dancers are more apparent and the delicacies of their motions can be more clearly perceived. The spectators sit crouching on their haunches all round the border, leaving only at one end an empty place for the musicians and for the heap of hot embers on which the tambourines are warmed every now and then so as to tighten the skins when they loosen. A strong scent of aromatic plants floats in the air, for it is supper-time, and most suppers are cooked on fires made with a dry shrub which yields a particular smell that is exquisitely characteristic of the country.

The first dancer comes forward on tiptoe and begins by going round the stage provided for the dance. He advances in short, rhythmic, gliding steps, his arms akimbo; then stops in the middle, and starts drooping, twisting, turning with jerky gestures at precisely those moments when a white man's eye least expects him to do so. He is followed by another and yet another, till sometimes half a dozen or more youngsters are showing off their odd graces at once. It looks at first like an improvisation, but little by little the rules of an ancient and intricate art may be clearly detected; you feel that there is nothing accidental in the performance, that it is regulated by traditional laws, full of

subtlety and purpose.

The dance may have had a ritualistic origin at a remote period; now it is undoubtedly voluptuous, though it still follows fixed principles, the meaning of which has sunk into oblivion. The 'batchàs', as the dancers are called, use as a medium their slim young bodies, all totally devoid of that exuberance of form which is necessary to the perfection of feminine beauty, as it is understood in the East, and neither in shape, garb nor manner do they attempt to look like women. Still, many details of their make-up, such as the straight line of their painted eyebrows, the long hair made still longer by artificial tresses with jewelled tassels tied to the ends, the henna'd nails, palms and heels all point to effeminacy. Their faces remain perfectly motionless right through the dance, and their eyes never rest on the audience, but are more and more drowned, as the hours go by, in a dream of imaginary delight. From time to time they stop to rest and wipe the moisture off their faces. Then on all sides tea-bowls are timidly proffered to quench their thirst, if such be their desire. Sometimes one of the boys will accept the offer and, bending humbly, with his left hand on his chest, sip some green tea out of the big Chinese bowl which he has taken with his right. By accepting the drink it is not he who is receiving a kindness; it is he who, on the

contrary, is conferring a boon. It is considered so splendid to be a dancer that a mark of friendship or respect coming from one of them is an honour, and I have more than once seen some aged whitebeard actually weep with emotion at having a batchà accept his bowl for a minute – so sweet is it to have such a distinction thrust upon you in public.

Sometimes, though very rarely, the dancers reinforce their action with their voices; they catch up a few bars of the music and for a short time join the singers, going on in the meanwhile with their steps. As for the words sung, they are usually some complimentary exclamation or epithet repeated over and over again without any alteration. I remember once hearing all through the night the following two sentences: 'Oh! a hundred blossoms of the apricot-tree', and 'Oh! a hundred blossoms of the peach-tree', sung out in endless succession with merely a different inflexion for each of the two and sometimes a new measure, as the dance became more animated. To the uninitiated foreigner it is not at first apparent why the dance should cease at any particular moment. It stops abruptly after a climax, though previously it had gone smoothly on after seemingly similar climaxes; however, there is no doubt about the right time in the minds of the performers, for they all relapse into repose with astounding unanimity.

The technical side of the dance is a regular science; there are passionate devotees of different schools with refinements so minute as to remain unnoticed by the casual observer: something like the various theories professed by *aficionados*, the lovers of bull-fights in Spain.

As a rule the ballet of *batchàs* is apt to appear monotonous and rather insipid to a stranger. Only once did I obtain a deeper insight into its possibilities, on an occasion when fortuitous circumstances created a particular atmosphere. I was passing through Samarcand with a friend who, though he knew but little of native life, was very much attracted by it, and insisted upon making the most of his short stay in the old city by gathering as many impressions as possible. We had spent the whole day in loitering about mosques and bazaars, and after a rather crowded afternoon and a late dinner, I suggested going to see a *bazm*. However, all the companies of *batchàs* were already engaged by other pleasure-seekers, and long drives from the best dancing-places to less well-known ones yielded no result. It was getting late and we were feeling rather disappointed, when a man, seeing us intent on witnessing a performance, offered to arrange something, even if it were not with one of the fashionable 'companies'. We accepted, and he took us to a garden where we

waited for a while, till a solitary dancer arrived with only two tambourine-players for orchestra. A carpet was spread out, and two lanterns, stuck up on short poles, shed an uncertain light on to its faded pattern. A few round-capped elms and mulberry-trees screened us off from the outer world, and narrow, pointed poplars rose high up behind them into the star-bespangled sky.

The dancer didn't resemble the common type of batchà, ruddy, bright-eyed, roguish urchins as these usually are. Almond-shaped eyes in a thin pale face, an amazingly supple, spare figure dressed in greys and blues instead of the rather garish splashes of vivid colours which his like are wont to wear, and a morbid languishing grace, made up a silhouette which reminded me more of Egypt or Syria than of Turkestan. There was a strange fascination in his queer motions, and the thin, cracked voice with which he sometimes accompanied himself, gave the whole performance a relish, not of ballet, but of a mystic ceremony in which religion and sorcery had blended their incantations. When, later on, he rested, I questioned him as to the words of his songs, for the swiftly changing measure prevented my catching their sense; but he was lazy and vague, and only condescended to explain that they were very old songs handed down from one generation to another, and that he could not possibly remember

the words unless he sang them; it was clear that I would not be able to extract from him a plain rendering of their meaning. And I didn't dare to insist, lest I broke the spell; for by degrees our shabby little performance in the small garden was assuming in my eyes a mysterious depth and significance which I had been far from expecting.

A relic of unknown ages had revived before me. It belonged to slow processions winding their ways through huge temples amidst clouds of incense; to ancient beliefs and customs now dead and forgotten; to rites and rules ordained by powerful sages conversant with the unseen and guided by occult forces. I suddenly felt as if I were no longer witnessing a rather commonplace entertainment in the security of a civilized epoch. All around me blew the breath of distant years when the brutality of life was redeemed by an intense and potent spirituality, only accessible to those initiated ones who knew how to guard its secrets from the vulgar crowd. The hedge of sheltering trees receded and melted away; the deep night, crammed close with stars, against which I could just guess on one side the tall ruin of Bibi-Khanum's mosque and on the other the pale ridge crowned with the domes of Shah-i-Zindah—that was the real background of the picture. Those venerable monuments themselves, the outcome of older and more mysterious

civilizations, were not they the actual fountain of grace from which flowed that quaint inspiration which was embodied before me in the weird art of a frail and ambiguous dancing-boy?

But a cock crowed, a pale streak arose in the East, and the wretched *batchà* began complaining of fatigue. All the glamour with which my imagination had vested him peeled off and crumbled away. The vision was no more. But had a part been really played by my imagination? There had been like a window thrown open, a curtain slowly drawn aside, till suddenly a thick mist had swamped the picture and the conjurer's trick was over with nothing left behind it. No, surely it had again been one of Samarcand's admirable moods. After a long and disappointing play of cat and mouse, she had deftly indulged in a bewitching caress, quenching for a moment her lover's thirst, in order to make him yearn still more insatiably for ever new glimpses of her beauty.

IX

ISKANDER-ZULKARNAIN

A SINGLE glance at the valley in which Samarcand is built is sufficient to see that human life must have prospered here since time immemorial. It is the valley of the River Zerafshan (which in Persian means 'the gold-strewer'), but, speaking more accurately, it is an undulating plain with a wall of high mountains bordering it on the south, while on the north a distant chain of hills blots out part of the horizon without closing the city in.

The general aspect of the landscape is enchanting. There is a breadth about it and an elegance of flowing lines which makes it attractive at first sight; besides, it is clearly apparent that the oldest caravan-routes of Asia were bound to pass here, as this is the natural crossing of the ways, the unavoidable meeting-place of tradesmen coming from China, India, Kabul, Iran, Bokhara and the Turanian steppes. Who were the first to settle here? Some day scientific excavations may be able to solve the question; for the present every Samar-

candī knows for a certainty that his town was built by King Samar very long ago. But how long ago? And who was King Samar and what else did he do? No one has any information. There must have been a Samar, for the second part of the city's name, 'cand', means town, while the first part, 'Samar', is not known to mean anything by itself: it must, therefore, be the name of the man who founded the town, and after whom it was called. I have never been able to elicit a more plausible explanation.

The first time that, to our knowledge, Samarcand played a part in history was during the Macedonian conquest. The incredible adventure of the Greek Army marching through Persia right down to India has never been forgotten, and the wonderful personality of Alexander the Great has left a deep imprint all over Central Asia. Not only was his invasion the dawn of a new era; not only did the Greek settlements, which he so carefully fostered, act as a ferment of new life and new ideas; but the peculiar characteristics of the man who had brought all this from a far-off land were so powerful and so delightful that nearly every spot he visited has gratefully preserved his memory. Reminiscences of him crop up at the most unexpected places. Speaking once to Iskander-Khan, the lawful sovereign of distant Badakhshan, now dethroned

by the Afghans, I asked him if he had not been so called in honour of the great Macedonian. What was my amazement to learn that he considered himself the direct offspring of Alexander's stock, through some fifty-five to sixty generations, the genealogy of which he was able to write out at once!

The name of Iskander-Zulkarnain, the 'two-horned Alexander', was so deeply rooted in the people's affections, that even Islam was powerless against it and had to adopt the hero for its own. According to the prevailing belief, Alexander is one of the very few men chosen by Allah for a divine mission and bearing the seal of the Almighty—on a par, that is to say, with Mahomet. As for the unexpected surname of 'two-horned', it probably comes from the coins of the Diadochs, which bear on the obverse Alexander's idealized profile with a ram's skin for headgear, the horns of the ram entwining the ears. On the other hand, according to the Moslem glossaries, the name means 'master of both halves of the world'.

After the tragic death of Darius and the pursuit of the murderer, Alexander's route through what is now Nishapur, Meshed, Merv and Bokhara brought the army to Samarcand (or Maracanda, as Plutarch and Curtius called it). The importance of the place at that time is manifest when we remember that Alexander thought it worth while

for two years to tear himself away from Samarcand. Did he actually live on the spot which owes its later beauty to Timur? Probably the 'kalah' or mediaeval fortress, built on the highest spot, not far from the river, was his residence, in accordance with that unvarying rule which makes the master of an Asiatic land dwell on an eminence from which he can watch in comparative security what is going on around. That point can only be determined by systematic excavation; in its present state the Kalah bears no trace of Alexander.

Turned into an arsenal, the Kalah religiously preserves but one magnificent relic, the 'kok-tash' or 'blue stone', the throne of Samarcand in Moslem days. This is a huge block of grey marble, carved in the Persian style, and on to it tradition says that every master of Samarcand was lifted when conquest or election had given him the city. He was first placed erect on a white felt mat, and then hoisted up and exposed to all eyes on the kok-tash, amidst the acclamations of his followers. This was the necessary consecration of his power. A vaulted chamber has been built round three sides of the throne, and an iron grating makes it accessible to visitors from the front. But this is the only vestige of the past which the Kalah has retained.

The plain beyond it, called Afrosiab, now waterless and desert, was the site of the Greek town. It

has never yet been explored, but every year after the winter rains small objects are washed out there which all denote a Greek origin: coins, potsherds, small gems; sometimes Greek swords have emerged from the mud. Once, many years ago, a misguided amateur archaeologist blew up part of the ground with dynamite, but this mis-spent energy naturally led to no discoveries. So that up to now Alexander's colony has remained a barren waste which may probably become some day a rich field for excavations. It stretches off to the north-east and merges into a steppe, equally scorched and grey, but marked by a rather definite limit, where the site of the former settlement comes to an end. At present one meets here with pictures which are not connected with Alexander's epoch, though the bare fact of Afrosiab's being their background gives them a peculiar fascination.

The first time that I rode along in that direction, I met two children with a goat. The goat was obstinate and refused to go where she was led, so one of the boys tried to drag her by the horns, while the other pushed her from behind. It reminded me of those groups, borrowed from antique life, which were such favourites in late eighteenth century art. Everyone concerned was enjoying himself; the youngsters laughing and the goat prancing about. It all looked so merry and

graceful that it might have been put there in the midst of this ruinous desolation just for a contrast. Of course I at once joined in the fun, and the boys began insisting that I should buy the goat. 'But what should I do with it?' said I. 'Give it for a game of kok-buri,' said they. Now 'kok-buri', which means 'grey wolf', is the favourite national form of sport. A goat is killed (ritualistically, so as to be lawful food later on) and one man gallops off holding it under his knee. Other horsemen, sometimes a huge crowd of them, try to take it away, and the wretched carcass is snatched and torn and twisted from one saddle to another. The one who has been able to keep it longest, or to get it back several times, wins it for a prize. It requires a firm grip and much agility to distinguish oneself in such a game. The horses often seem to enjoy and understand it as much as the men; they kick and rear, bite at their neighbours and push through in order to get near the goat-bearer, who is at last surrounded by a dense ring of competitors, all shouting and yelling at the top of their voices. Either he or his successful rival has to tear through the crowd and gallop off in a new direction, while all the rest are in hot pursuit after him. As the natives are very good horsemen, I have seldom seen any of them unsaddled during a match of kok-buri, though it is difficult to understand how they manage

to keep their seats. Saddle-girths, however, snap sometimes in the turmoil and accidents are not infrequent.

It was such a game that the goat-boys were suggesting. 'But', said I, 'supposing we kill the goat, where are the horsemen who are to fight for the prize?' 'The prize', said they, 'is the rare thing: if only *it* is there, men will appear to compete for it.' I weakly yielded, and the little villains at once performed the sacrifice. There was no altar, no incense, no garlands; but in all other respects the mock antique ceremony was celebrated with perfect decorum. We had duly bled the poor beast, when, as chance would have it, two men rode by. We told them that we were ready for a game, and they galloped off to gather friends. Twenty minutes later we had half a dozen candidates. So it was all settled: there was the prize and there were the sportsmen; I was to be umpire and the two boys would do duty for an audience.

At first all went quite smoothly. But soon the man who had secured the goat was seen to have a much stronger horse than the others, who cantered about vaguely after him, and then came back and stared and grinned at me while their friend vanished on the horizon and was gone. Then we all burst out laughing; for the whole thing had been a joke

to cheat me out of a few roubles, while supplying the rest of the company with a good supper. They were delighted to see me enjoy the fun as much as they did themselves, so we parted the best of friends. Such was my first impression of Afrosiab.

I have often returned there to ponder over its possibilities without being able to start a systematic exploration of the place, but I have no doubt that a most eloquent picture of Alexander's epoch is buried in that soil and might easily be brought to light. The Greek settlement went on prospering for a long time. After the disruption of Alexander's empire it became the capital of Sogdiana, at certain times subject to Bactria and at others in revolt against it, till little by little, under the influence of the surrounding atmosphere, the ideals which had been brought here from distant Europe were gradually modified, and were eventually submerged by the ocean of Asiatic barbarity. In the course of those four centuries, from the third to the seventh of our era, when the Sassanian dynasty was attempting to bind together the lands of the ancient Persian Empire, Samarcand was a distant outpost of civilization on the border of the Central Asiatic steppes from whence so many different invasions of nomads were still to pour down. Then, after Islam had smashed and destroyed the neo-Persian kingdom, fresh centres of a new culture

arose, and of their number Samarcand little by little became an important city, till Timur chose her for his capital and made her what she is even now. Her dry earth has surely kept vestiges of all those epochs of her past, and her store of Greek remains cannot but be of considerable interest. Treasures are continually found which are mostly lost to science, though some of them have ended by reaching the local museums.

Once, as I was passing through, I heard that in the ghetto a man had been digging a well in his yard and had come across a pot full of gold coins. I rushed there at once. The fellow denied the rumour, assuring me that the pot contained but a single coin, which he produced, but it was so rubbed and worn that no trace of relief remained upon it. The only thing that might be asserted about it was that it belonged to pre-Islamic times. I suspected the man of having kept this one coin for show, in order to avoid questions about the others; but whatever the truth may have been, I knew I would never see the whole of the find. He was quite willing, however, to show me the exact spot where it had come to light and to help me with further excavations.

So I set to work and in the course of a couple of days extracted from under his house four terracotta coffins of undoubted Greek origin. They

X

AROUND SAMARCAND

THE immediate surroundings of an ancient town are always attractive, especially if that town has been more important formerly than at present. If it has recently passed through a period of shrinkage, then all the beautiful places in its closest neighbourhood will not have been swallowed up by ugly suburbs.

In Samarcand, as in most of the old cities of Russian Turkestan, part of the belt of gardens which encircles the city has been taken for the site of a new Russian settlement, where an entirely different life is led, quite apart from that of the native quarters. Otherwise the country near Samarcand has preserved its original features and the natural charm of the Zerafshan Valley has not been spoilt by European-looking buildings. The hills which rise over the plain to the south are covered with woods planted since the Russian conquest, and charming walks can be enjoyed under their dense foliage. They grow mostly on terraces, and by

climbing slowly up, one obtains at each halt a more and more extensive view over the valley. Small farms, huddled in among the outskirts of the mountains, peep through the trees and shrubs growing thickly around them, or over the invariable pinkish-grey mud walls which secure their privacy from the road; they become rarer as the distance from the town increases, till a spur overlooking the river marks the extreme limit of the suburb. On this hill, called Chapan-Atà, a battle was fought which gave Samarcand to Russia in 1867; it is crowned by a monument commemorating the event. Nearly opposite, the Zerafshan is spanned by an elegant double arch which is said to be the only remnant of a bridge built by Timur.

Like everywhere else in this part of the district, many a corner is rich with historical associations. One of the most picturesque spots, not far from the bridge, is the tomb of Hodja-Daniar, a renowned place of pilgrimage. The saint who is buried here is believed by the natives to be the prophet Daniel, though it would be difficult to explain how, after his experiences in the lions' den, Daniel wandered in his old age so far afield as to have been buried in Samarcand. There is a sanctuary near the tomb, but the latter itself is in the open, no protective mosque having ever been built over it. It stands on an even bit of ground between two deep and

narrow chasms which rivulets, flowing down from the mountains, have little by little cut in the soft clay soil. Such chasms are one of the features of the landscape. When in springtime the waters rush down from the heights, they gradually sink deeper and deeper into the channels they follow, and huge clefts seem sometimes to have been slashed as though by a giant's knife in the yellow cake of the hill-ridges, with a stream of water gurgling somewhere far below. Hodja-Daniar's tomb has an imposing pedestal cut away on two sides by such precipitous ravines.

The reputation of holiness attached to the spot is probably very ancient, though both chapel and tomb are simple whitewashed constructions. When the Russian Army first entered Samarcand, the sheikhs of this mazar tried to turn it into a centre of religious fanaticism and began by creating a halo of miracle around it. Their propaganda asserted that the saint would not submit to the necessity of having his bones lie in a land ruled by the infidels, and that, to show his displeasure, he was making his tomb expand. To the pious amazement of the population, week by week the monument did in fact grow, every now and then becoming longer by a few feet. Last Friday's pilgrims, when they came to pay their homage and perform their devotions at the shrine, could attest

that most certainly a week ago it had not reached a certain stone or bush, whereas to-day it had stretched out much farther than those landmarks. What was going to happen next, when already such a palpable miracle was apparent to all eyes? Some bricks and paint, deftly added on at night, would have been a sufficient explanation of the portent, but that was the only one which struck no one's mind. Crowds flocked to the holy place, while the bazaars were full of the wildest rumours. Seeing that the imagination of the people was ablaze, General Kaufmann, the first Viceroy of Turkestan, proclaimed that the prophet Daniel was as much a saint for Christians as for Moslems, and expressed a wish to go and pray at his tomb. Having reached it, he was sorely shocked to see that the burial-place of so great a man stood uncovered and even unprotected from wild beasts; nothing prevented their jumping over it at night. Who knew but what some impure jackal might defile it? So with the utmost reverence he ordered a low wall to be erected all round and quite close to it, and this simple act of respect was enough to calm the saint's ruffled feelings, for the tomb at once ceased its unnatural behaviour and, having reached the wall, has remained unaltered ever since. It is about thirty feet long, and unless you know the story you are rather perplexed to think what an

odd appearance the poor prophet must have had, so long and so narrow, as if he had used very high stilts and been buried with them.

To the north of Samarcand the plain rolls on for about thirty miles towards the Noor-Atà hills. The road cuts across a rich country covered with fields, vineyards and orchards. Prosperous-looking villages break up the monotony of the journey, and their tea-houses and shops, grouped near the highway under trees—willows mostly and poplars and mulberries—form a succession of pictures so attractive and so characteristic that in each locality it seems a pity to go on instead of stopping there for good. I have never heard of any historical facts or legends attached to that wealthy and quiet district. I believe, however, that such an absence of interesting reminiscences is entirely due to the carelessness of the oblivious East, for some traces at least of a vanished epoch stare in the face of every passer-by who, without even going out of his way, takes the trouble to notice them. Most undoubtedly a certain part at least of this high-road was much better known in other days than it is at present. Where did it lead to and what was the time of its glory? The enigma might be guessed, but up to now nobody has given it a single thought. The only outward sign of its existence—and what a sign!—is a double row of huge tumuli,

forming a straight line for about a mile. Every one of them is exactly like its neighbour in size and shape, and they stand at equal intervals, so that the traveller sees one of them on his right, then another on his left, and so on till the two amazing rows stop abruptly as they began. They have been heaped up on a flat plain, and there is no doubt that from the very first they were the work of man and not a freak of nature. Ever since the far-off age when innumerable spades dug up the earth so as to form those equal round hillocks, there they have stood on both sides of what is now a path leading to small hamlets but which must formerly have been a necessary and important thoroughfare. Are they tombs, as tumuli invariably are? Have they been looted, as were most tumuli of South-Eastern Russia in the Middle Ages? What men were buried under them? And of what race and civilization? No reply to these questions has been sought for.

The tumuli must all have been made at the same time, for if they had been erected at different times, surely the later generations would have vied with their predecessors and tried to honour their own heroes by higher mounds of earth than those of former, half-forgotten heroes. But what heroes were they? How did it happen that there were so many of them at once, and what road was this

to be bordered by such impressive tombs? Was it a processional road? What processions advanced along it, and to what temples?

It would require years of active labour to solve the riddle, and up to now no Samarcandî has ever guessed that a riddle exists. And if a mere chance once took me that way and made me realize that this is a wondrous alley, perhaps pregnant with unexpected revelations, what unknown treasures may not still lie hidden around Samarcand? There probably they are, covered up like so many Sleeping Beauties, waiting for the centuries to elapse before a Prince Charming comes to arouse them with a spade, perhaps, if not with a kiss, and make the world richer and wiser by unveiling their long-lost secrets.

BOKHARA

BOOHARÀ-I-SHARIF

UP to now Bokhara has been known all over the East as Booharà-i-Sharif, meaning 'Booharà the holy'. For centuries its halo of saintliness was enhanced by its immunity from any sort of foreign desecration. When at last it was doomed; when nothing more was of any avail to secure it from being defiled by that invention of the devil, the fire-spitting machine—even then the mischief-mongers did not dare to treat the holy city as was their wont. Its radiance cowed and subdued them. Their sacrilegious hands hesitated at the eleventh hour and were compelled to halt at a respectful distance from the venerable walls. As a matter of fact the Russian Government was apprehensive of stirring up the religious fanaticism of the crowd and therefore decided not to carry the railway line up to the actual precincts of the town.

The result was that a horrible modern settlement sprang up half a dozen miles from the southern gate of Bokhara and crowded round a

station known as New Bokhara. Thus the workshops, go-downs, offices, stores and hotels which compose the suburb were kept from too close a proximity to the ancient mosques. A special commission was appointed to choose the site, but it is difficult to guess by what considerations its members were guided, for of all the dreary, desolate, barren holes, half clay, half salt, where no trees will grow . . . Anyhow, it is there that most travellers take up their quarters.

True lovers of the East, however, find their way to more picturesque if perhaps less comfortable shelter. They climb up the gigantic steps of one of the old native caravanserais in the bazaars and enjoy a few days amidst surroundings so strongly redolent of the Middle Ages that it all seems exactly like living in the Basra or the Mosul of the Arabian tales. The window, an open frame with no glass nor substitute for glass in it, encloses a square of deep blue sky with pale blue enamelled domes and minarets boldly towering in sharp outline against the radiant background of azure. The top of each cupola is crowned by a stork's nest, and the clumsy birds stand flapping their black and white wings and clapping their coral-coloured beaks in deep contempt of the busy city down below, as if the whole of that limitless space above was theirs and theirs only. The window is placed so as not to

overlook the nearest roofs, for as a rule all roofs are terraces on which the people, and especially the women, both old and young, spend most of their lives. Of course the roofs are cut up and sheltered by lightly built partitions; curtains sway in the breeze, daubing patches of vivid tints between the rows of pots with flowers and scented shrubs which do their best as roof-gardens. Although all this manages to create a certain amount of privacy, still a caravanserai window, on whose sill any stranger might lean, ought not to intrude too closely on the busy household ladies at their work. The only creatures to own an absolute freedom of all house-tops are the enormous native cats with bushy side-whiskers and fluffy tails, a species closely akin to the Persian; they swarm all over the place and travel about very cleverly from roof to roof.

Bokhara is a crowded place: its massive crenelated walls allow of no expansion. The huge gates, facing each of the main roads, are closed at sunset and opened at sunrise. If a belated wayfarer approaches one of them after the right time, no entreaties of his, no efforts, no persuasion will prevail upon the guards. Locks and bolts will remain unmoved, and he might just as well strike his tent at once and settle his camp, however tantalizingly near to home he may have to spend this last night of his journey.

Walls do not only encircle the city, they divide it as well into separate parts or quarters, so that in various places inside the town there are gates with soldiers on duty, who are expected to discriminate and to prohibit or permit of thoroughfare after dark. Being a Russian in uniform, I could always move freely about, but it was not the same for everyone. I had a friend in the bazaars, one David, a Jew from Herat, who dealt mostly in antiques and had collected a vast store of miscellaneous information on various topics. He was an old man and lived with his numerous descendants in the very middle of the ghetto. The people of his race have to follow certain fixed rules in Bokhara; they have had a large settlement there for many centuries and have preserved a very pure physical type. It has been surmised that the Bokhara Jews are really the lost tribes of Israel, and there is a tradition that they were brought to Turkestan by Nebuchadnezzar. Anyhow, they had lost all touch with their brethren when, in modern times, the Russian conquest of Central Asia threw down the barriers which kept them apart from the rest of the world. Whatever shadow of truth there may be in the story, those long centuries of unalloyed Moslem rule, fanatical and rigid, built up a special and not too favourable code, to which the Jewish population is obliged to bend. To start with, no Jew may ride a horse,

however wealthy he happens to be; the utmost he can do is to ride an ass. As for dress or apparel, that also is subservient to particular regulations. In that country of gorgeously coloured robes a rich Jew may wear a khalat of the most delicately tinted velvet or of the most vivid flowered silk, shot perhaps with silver or gold; but a robe is of no real importance in an Eastern man's apparel: the belt, or kamarband, is the thing that matters. Fine belts are family heirlooms, and they are closely connected with the swords they are meant to support. Naturally, a Jew in Bokhara is not allowed to carry weapons, but he is not even entitled to wear a kamarband, however simple or unobtrusive. He is obliged instead to use a common rope. When I once asked what could be the reason for this, I was told it was in order to have the necessary implement at hand in case the wearer should be hung; the rope is always there to remind him of the probability of such proceedings. Another restriction is that Jews are not allowed on the streets after curfew. My friend David, however, had various interests to attend to and his business sometimes detained him away from home beyond legal hours. On such occasions he would come and ask me to lead him back to his house. A Russian uniform was a sufficient sesame for opening the gates, so that with a joke or a tip to the astonished soldiers

I would take David back to his anxious family.

Whether it be due to Nebuchadnezzar or not, the Jews of Bokhara have remained a very pure race and the good looks of the women are proverbial. They don't wear veils like the Moslem ladies; nevertheless they lead a semi-secluded life and are seldom to be seen outside the ghetto. On festive days they appear in amazing head-dresses, extravagant tiaras or mitres, bejewelled and bespangled; under those high-crowned caps, set straight on the forehead with no hair showing in between, their pale delicate complexions acquire a quality of refinement which recalls the velvety softness of a white blossom, gardenia- or camelia-like.

The Jewish children also are lovely and quite different from the offspring of the other natives. Their small and well-cut features are of the type people call 'Biblical' (without clearly knowing, I suspect, the exact meaning of that word). They are always dressed in bright colours, and if it wasn't for most of the boys having mangy heads, they would really be the prettiest little specimens of dark-haired humanity to be seen anywhere.

Curio-searching is a great excitement in Bokhara, and the immense bazaars are one of the most delightful hunting-grounds anyone can imagine. There are main lanes in them, of course, all shady and cool, and covered over with a roofing of rush-

mats. They are so densely thronged that when you suddenly meet a splendid Bokharan official on a fiery stallion surrounded by a retinue of scribes and servants, or else a long string of camels with bales on their backs and their silly pompous heads adorned with networks of red and blue wool all in tufts and balls with bells tinkling and camelmen shouting, your first impression is that nobody will ever get through either way, and that however much may be said, screamed, howled or yelled about it, the thoroughfare is blocked for good. Eventually, however, with much sidling, apologizing, pushing, pulling, pressing, elbowing, climbing, squatting and so on, everyone manages to move away. The turbans of the officials or the high-poised heads of the camels slowly progress through the semi-darkness, with just a flash of light touching upon them somewhere farther down as they pass under a hole in the matting where a dazzling ray of sunshine cuts through the gloom.

Right and left, at unexpected turnings, rotundas or squares open on to the alley. These are special bazaars for particular sorts of wares: rugs or velvets, china or saddles, chintzes or silks, shoes or tea, trunks or embroideries. It is all exactly like the Baghdad of Harun-al-Rashid, so that you expect to hear someone among the passers-by shouting: 'New lamps for old.'

As for all those wares, notwithstanding their Western appellations, they are totally unlike the things which such names usually convey to our minds. Saddles, for instance, are made of wood, with a high pommel ending in a kidney-shaped top; the seat is usually lacquered pea-green or scarlet with a border of stencilled ivory; it is sunk so as to allow a soft cushion to be strapped on to it. Trunks are painted all colours of the rainbow, with panels of flowers and fruit and birds, and with bright metal framework on all borders; they have locks which play little tunes of three or four notes, produced by strips of tin which the key catches when you turn it. Velvets, when plain, are crimson or emerald; when flowered, they show patterns in all sorts of tints and have a lovely softness due to slight irregularities in the texture of the material. They are woven by hand and are not as a machine-made velvet, which would be composed of threads each of one colour; here the threads are dyed so as to form a pattern. Out on the street you may come across a thick bunch of silk threads stretched out to the full length of the future piece of velvet. The dyers are dipping it into, shall we say, yellow dye (which, by the way, is made of pomegranate rind), and all the parts which are not meant to be yellow are covered up so that they shall not be touched by the yellow dye. When this is dry, the yellow parts

are wrapped up in their turn and those which are meant to be purple or blue or any other hue are uncovered and dipped into the corresponding cauldron; and so on till the whole warp is prepared according to the pattern. Then the woof is brought in, a pale greyish silk which gives a silvery peach-bloom appearance to the velvet, and through it you see where the colours of the pattern have slightly run into each other during the tying and untying process, making the whole surface of the material incredibly soft to the eye. In the bazaar for silks you meet with wonderful colours: pale green shot with orange, bright pink with a sunset glow; I once found a pale silvery yellow which the weaver told me he had obtained by boiling the silk in chopped straw.

One of the attractive features of the bazaars is that everyone is so exquisitely polite. However provoking it may be to have a clumsy person upset one's elaborately concocted shop-front, you never witness a violent quarrel, never hear angry words. If there is any shouting, any loud cries, it is only in order to make oneself heard above the general din. The only unpleasantly noisy bazaar is that of the coppersmiths, who hammer mercilessly at their pots and pails, engrave them, polish them, and sell them, all on the same spot. A man can spend his whole day in the bazaars: there are street-corner

kitchens (very much like those in Pompeii), where for a few coppers you can eat your luncheon over the counter; there are bath-houses in various lanes; barbers' booths are frequent. Everything a man can require between sunrise and sunset is to be found in the bazaars.

Bokhara's chief discomfort is the lack of water. In all the country around, as well as higher up along the course of the Zerafshan, the cultivation of the soil has spread and intensified during the last fifty years, and as the town only gets what the fields don't require, it happens that the water-tanks inside the walls get replenished after they have been sorely in need of it for a long time. Right in the middle of the city there is one great tank overshadowed by huge trees. Its old stone steps, as well as the causeways above them, are crowded with tea-houses and barbers' shops, so that the whole place has more of the atmosphere of a quiet little fair, or perhaps a club, than of a street. This is the centre of social life, where news is imparted and gossip exchanged.

One of the barber's specialities is the extracting of 'rishtà', the abominable Bokhara worm, bred from drinking foul water. The animal works its way through the human body till it reaches the skin, where it forms a boil; this is cut open and the head of the parasite is tied to a small stick, which is twisted round a little farther every day till the whole



TEA-HOUSES

of the worm is drawn out. Hurry is considered fatal, as the beast might snap and die, which would entail a more serious operation. In the normal course of events patients go about with an open wound and a small stick across it, and the barber's business is to turn the stick round about half an inch every day. Most inhabitants of the town of Bokhara bear at least one scar on some part of their person as a reminiscence of this awful malady.

Round various corners near the big tank you come upon larger squares where at sunset professional story-tellers carry on their trade. Good story-tellers bring together very considerable audiences, and there would not be room enough to gather a crowd close to the water. So everyone squats on the pavement—both those who attend and the one who relates. As for the tales, they follow the old rules of Sheherazade, going on day after day and breaking off every night just at the most exciting episode.

In the morning you hear at certain places other voices: the humming of shrill young throats, occasionally interrupted by the gruff tones of an old man's remark, or else by the smart smack of a stick. This means that you are near a school. The pupils squat on the floor, swaying to and fro and shouting their lessons at the pitch of their lungs. The main object is to learn by heart the

suras of the Koran, even if their exact meaning in Arabic is not clearly understood. The swaying motion is believed to develop the powers of memory. As for the master's long flexible wand, it strikes the boys only on their heads (if ever it strikes them at all), for it is the head which is the seat of understanding, and in case of disobedience or inattention it is the head which has to be recalled to order. Knowing the whole of the Koran by heart is thought of very highly. There are charitable institutions for housing the blind, and the inmates spend all their time chanting the sacred texts. By so doing they acquire merit for the founders of the asylum; another advantage is that they create an atmosphere of piety in the whole neighbourhood, where their loud voices are heard from afar.

Education is mostly religious, and besides reading the Koran the schoolboys are taught how to assume in the right manner all the attitudes which are due in the course of the five daily prayers. Owing to the importance of ritualistic motions, much attention is lavished on this branch of learning, and the actual gymnastics of worship are therefore invariably performed with wonderful simultaneousness, even by a numerous and crowded congregation. There is no doubt that the careful and distinguished gestures, which are so characteristic of the whole population in all circumstances of

life, are the result of this method of training. Personal cleanliness being part of the requirements of religion, any man who has been to school has been taught in what particular fashion he must not only wash, but even blow his nose or mop the sweat off his brow. Thanks to religion, everyone has good manners, even men who may perhaps be well-nigh illiterate.

Schools are usually housed in the precincts of a mosque. Unfortunately for white men, the mosques in a town like Bokhara, which has never been conquered by the infidel, are unconditionally closed to anyone who is not a Moslem. The country recognized the supremacy of Europeans (when it was obliged to do so); but that is entirely different, being a purely political step, carrying no weight in religious matters. A few mosques have preserved some vestiges of their original decoration: blue cupolas and tiles in panels around their entrance porticoes; but none of this work is of a very good epoch and it is mostly in a rather dilapidated condition.

The one striking architectural feature of Bokhara is the great minaret (*Minar-i-Kalôn*), a tall, round brick tower of the seventeenth century, covered by a decoration of raised geometrical patterns formed by the brickwork. Up to the era of the Russian protectorate, this minaret was used for the execution

of criminals: they were dashed from the top of it on to the pavement below. The prison, which houses criminals during trial, is a horrible place: narrow, dark, crowded and filthy. Dangerous subjects, besides being attached to an iron ring fixed in the wall, are chained to each other in a row. The heat, the stench, the horror of prevailing conditions are appalling. The prisoners are allowed just enough food to keep body and soul together, but they are not forbidden to receive alms. Each time I went to Bokhara I used to take them bread and money and listen to their complaints, the chief of which was the uncertainty about how long they would have to stay there before anyone troubled to deal with their case. The practice of casting criminals down from the great minaret had been replaced by cutting their throats with a long pointed knife, the blade of which grows broader towards the handle; the point is inserted into the neck behind the throat, then the knife is pushed forward, swiftly, at one stroke, so that the throat is cut open, not from the front, but from the inside.

A curious particularity of Bokhara is its numerous cemeteries. The whole of the city is holy ground, and it is therefore very desirable to be buried there. Apparently an Eastern sun is a powerful scavenger, for those burial-fields have no offensive odour. It is not very clear why this



should be the case, for Islam encourages the laying away of corpses in badly closed coffins at no great depth in the ground, in order to make human bodies revert to dust as quickly as possible. Still, it is a fact; and those cemeteries, scattered about all over the place, go on being freely used.

However insanitary it may be, that particularity harmonizes wonderfully well with the whole of the surroundings; just like the rest of the picture, it makes one realize the immutability of the East. It is the Western onlooker who is out of place: what he sees is all exactly as it was centuries ago; the simple scale of human relationships, which is the foundation-stone of the life he surreptitiously partakes of, has never been altered and is the same as in the Arabian tales. By peering very closely, he may notice that many robes and turbans are no longer hand-woven, and he may then remember that there is actually a railway station some miles away. However, those are details of no importance which do not go deep below the surface of things. For the true essence of twentieth century Bokhara is the same as that of Sindbad the Sailor and all the numerous Kalendars.

II

RESIDENCES OF THE AMEER OF BOKHARA

THE Ameer of Bokhara possesses quite a number of residences. They serve various purposes, but the primary one of being used by the sovereign to live in is not always among them.

The oldest residence, a mediaeval fortress with turrets and buttresses, situated right in the middle of the city, hardly ever sees him. It is called the 'Ark' and is considered the official seat of government. Its tenant is the chief magistrate, the 'koosh-beghi of above', who is, so to say, head of the Home Office and represents his master in all matters of internal administration. Besides this official there is another koosh-beghi, 'the one of below', whose duties are of quite another kind: he attends to foreign affairs and never leaves the Ameer except when sent by him on a mission.

The first koosh-beghi acts the part of supreme ruler; the peace and safety of the sacred city are in his hands. As, therefore, all the responsibilities of home government rest with him, he must, whatever

happens, always be available, and consequently, so long as he is in office, may never leave the Ark at all. I used sometimes to go and see the poor old gentleman. He had already been sitting in his glorious prison for twenty years, and the only thing he complained of to me was that there was no garden in the Ark and no available space for making one. He did his best to remedy this deficiency by growing flowers in pots on his roof terrace, but he thought the compensation inadequate and considered it a nuisance that his exalted position had for so many long years prevented his sitting in the shade of a tree. There is no denying that the glare, the dust and the smells of Bokhara all through the sweltering heat of summer (which lasts from April to October) must have called forth by contrast enchanting visions of meadows, orchards, flowerbeds and brooks—all the delights so dear to an Eastern mind and tantalizingly never to be enjoyed in the Ark.

His companion, the lower koosh-beghi, leads an entirely different sort of life, having to be always on the alert and ready to go off somewhere at short notice. But if his existence is more interesting and more human than the pompous immobility of his friend in the Ark, it is also more full of dangers and pit-falls, the nature of which it is difficult to gauge according to the standards and knowledge

of a white man. This second koosh-beghi was a particular friend of mine. A Persian by birth, he had started life as a slave, but owing to his efficiency and cleverness, had risen through many vicissitudes to his exalted office. He was a self-made man, and the Ameer considered him a good servant and an obedient tool. But he had only his master's favour to rely upon, and in order not to lose that precious favour and be ruined by the intrigues of his enemies, he had to be always at court, to know all about whatever was going on, and to keep an attentive eye on those who might harm him. One day when he had been sent on a mission to Tashkent (the residence of the Russian Governor-General) he came to dine with me. Dressed in a purple velvet gown embroidered in gold, with a neatly folded turban of raw silk setting off his swarthy complexion, he was the perfect image of the important and well-to-do native. In the evening, after a great deal of beating about the bush, he asked me to let him have a photograph of myself. When that had been duly produced, signed and dated, I still felt some reticence in my guest's speech, till at last he made up his mind and asked for a second photograph. I understood at once and uttered no questions. He really and sincerely wanted to have my likeness in his house. But upon returning home he would be obliged to show the Ameer every single thing he had

brought back with him, in the number of which there would be my photo. The Ameer always professed to be very fond of me: when the photograph came to be produced, what would he do? He might perhaps keep it for himself and the poor koosh-beghi would never dare to ask me later on for another, as I might think he had not taken due care of the first and had lost it. So it was safer to ask for two at once and to hide one safely away for himself. He never gave me a stronger proof of friendship and confidence than that evening.

The Ameer's usual residence is Kerminch. It had become in the course of time the official seat of government, because the place, following the custom of such 'palace towns', grew up around the palace. The building has no particular charm, it even lacks character: the architecture is of a deplorable banality and the gardens but recently planted. The floors are covered with indifferent modern rugs, the electrical fittings are hideous; the house contains nothing of interest from an artistic standpoint. It is like other houses of Oriental potentates who attempt to live up to European standards without really understanding them. Not feeling the Westerner's requirements nor knowing the customs which have established certain forms and created particular surroundings, these gentlemen choose European furniture with an Oriental

absence of discrimination which fatally breeds the most unexpected assemblage of sundry articles, mostly gaudy and unsatisfactory. A rather amusing feature is the brass band which plays European tunes during meals; the performers learn their music exclusively by ear, the result being that they give forth familiar tunes fantastically distorted. However, if the silver is massive and well cleaned, the dinner quite eatable, the service correctly carried out and the band in the garden 'just like Europe', the true atmosphere of the place, if only it could be thoroughly studied, would form a wonderful chapter of human comedy. As it is, one feels it saturated with faintly outlined intrigue in suppressed and subdued tones, occasionally noticeable owing to furtive glances and gestures, though ever present and all-pervading. That impression, of course, is mere guess-work, no actual information being ever available.

The workings of favour and disfavour at the court of an Asiatic despot are a riddle to Western minds. I know the story, for instance, of a dear old gentleman who was head master of ceremonies for many years. He used to step out demurely with a tall silver wand in his hand, a beautiful snow-white beard spread out on his rose-coloured robe. He had been appointed to this office a long time ago. The Ameer had chosen him while he

was away from the court, on leave and, as it happened, just getting married to a beautiful young wife who pleased him immensely. The Ameer's summons reached him on the very day of the wedding, and he rushed to Kerminch the next morning with his mind still full of his lovely lady. Then the ordeal began. To ask for leave to go home might mean the ruin of a promising career. To try and obtain permission for his harem to come and join him might be explained as preposterous presumption—anyone who dared to show that he considered himself firmly anchored at court would very probably be turned out at once; besides, the Ameer does not feel in the least willing to be encumbered by the harems and households of his retinue. So the wretched man waited and waited, till, after twelve years had elapsed, the Ameer said one day with a smile: 'You have not seen your family for a long while. Go and spend a fortnight with them.' The master of ceremonies felt he couldn't wait any longer, not even for the next train. Kerminch is about thirty miles distant from Bokhara, so he at once jumped into his saddle and galloped over the steppe. He was so impatient that he couldn't bring himself to spare his steed, but urged it on and on till the poor brute fell from exhaustion. He bought himself another horse in the nearest village and rode on till at last he

reached home. On the appointed day he was back in Kerminch. The story of his ride had already got round and had reached the Ameer, who was delighted with it and nearly split his sides laughing over the adventure. When the old gentleman resumed his office, the master, in order to enjoy the joke once more, made him relate it again himself. That was all; but the Ameer's favour is capricious and you can never tell beforehand with any degree of certainty how things will turn out.

I was once on a mission to the Ameer's. Among the minor court officials there was one who had been attached to me for duty and who happened to be particularly useful and servicable. It was in the spring and the Ameer was going to leave soon for his yearly trip; at that season he always went for a cure to one of the watering-places in the Caucasus. The previous year my friend the minor court official had accompanied him, and he expected to be commandeered again this year for the journey. What troubled him was that no civilized-looking portmanteau could be obtained in Bokhara, and he thought that to travel in Russia merely with carpet saddle-bags wouldn't look smart at all. So as soon as I got back to Tashkent I sent him a present of a portmanteau of unmistakable 'European' brand. He was overwhelmed with gratitude; but, alas! during the Ameer's next trip he was left at home.

Had my ill-timed offering ruined his career? Or had he shown himself too cock-sure of being *persona grata*? I don't believe my portmanteau ever saw the inside of a luggage-van, unless the potentate simply kept it for himself and graciously offered the owner an opportunity for pondering over the instability of human fortunes. On the whole this seems to be the most probable epilogue of the story.

Besides Kerminch, there is a glaringly modern palace called Shir-Boodoon just outside Bokhara. A number of mementoes which the Ameer collected during various journeys to Russia are housed there. One of the rather startling ones is an old railway car stuck in the middle of a vast hall. It is the car which was put at his disposal when he first came to St. Petersburg, and which he expressed a desire to keep as a souvenir, the Emperor, of course, laughingly assenting. Later on, when the new railway line which linked his country through Orenburg to Russia was completed, he was given a large saloon car lacquered in cherry-red and ornamented with reproductions of his Order of the 'Star of Bokhara', so that railway officials should know what an exalted passenger was inside. He was immensely proud of this imperial gift.

The most characteristic of the Ameer's dwellings was, I think, a small shooting-lodge in the hills, where I once visited him. It was so small that

for a long time he wouldn't let me come there, saying he had no room to put me up. However, as he was ill and I had to see him on urgent business, I insisted, and eventually went there. I had intended to arrive in the morning and to leave the same night, but when I reached the place I found out that he was unwilling to face such a breach of etiquette and had made arrangements for me to stay the usual three days of a formal visit. The lodge was just a small native house built of sun-dried brick, and there were so few rooms in it that the old gentleman actually gave up his bedroom for my use, sleeping for three nights in one of his two living-rooms. This bedroom was an oblong rectangle with windows facing each other on both the long walls; and as the short walls were all doors, the only way of placing a bed was to put it right in the middle of the room. In one corner there was an iron stove, but the heating was done from the outside, so as not to bring messy fuel inside the house; I am afraid the greater part of the warmth that the stove was expected to yield got lost in the courtyard. The place is rather high up in the mountains, and though it was March when I was there, the snow was only just thawing off; the fresh grass was sprouting up on all sides, streams of water flowed down from all the hill-tops and everywhere one had to wade through thick mud.

Between the bedroom and the two small living-rooms there was a dark, crooked passage where you had to turn twice at right angles. From there it was that several times a day a servant would silently appear and summon me to 'the presence'. This would occur at the most unexpected hours—eleven at night or six in the morning sometimes. So I sat in my room all day long unless it had been definitely pre-arranged that I should go out at a certain hour. As I was living in such close proximity to an apparently crowded household, I never ventured to roam about without giving notice, lest I ran across one of the harem ladies whose presence I suspected all around.

The Ameer, an elderly man, very tall and enormously stout, had been laid up with an attack of gout when he had come up to this shooting-lodge late in the autumn, and he had remained there suffering agonies all through the winter. When I arrived he told me it was the eighty-sixth day of his sufferings. A cold, damp house and a diet largely composed of the greasiest mutton-pilau were not exactly my idea of the best treatment for the case; but I was no doctor and my business lay in an entirely different direction, so I only sympathized, but offered no advice. The Ameer liked the place; he told me that his fondness for it came from its being the first land he had ever owned; it had been

given to him by his father and was an excellent ground for sport. I wondered what the sport really could be and in what way it was practised, but feared I should probably never find out. Suddenly, however, the Ameer suggested that I should have a day's shooting in his stead. Was it really shooting? or hawking, perhaps? It couldn't be stalking (I realized that when I looked at his figure); and this was no country for hunting. Anyhow, I asked no questions, but accepted with grateful enthusiasm, and it was all fixed for two o'clock p.m. Naturally I had no guns with me, as I had come from Tashkent on a short mission and was returning there at once; the fact was so obvious that I never even mentioned it. Was I going to be offered a gun, and what sort of an implement would it be? At the appointed hour I waited to see what would happen. A retinue of brilliantly garbed courtiers led me out through a garden and on to a terrace overlooking a lake. This lake was overgrown all along its borders by a dense fringe of tall rushes. A number of men holding poles waded into the rushes and began striking right and left. Outside, on firm soil, stood hawksters with their birds, and, as the terrified ducks darted out of the rushes, they flew their hawks at them. Other men, in boats, collected the game as well as those of the birds of prey which

had fallen into the water. My only participation in the fun was to stand on my terrace and look down. When the performance was over, the birds I had 'killed' were brought to me. They were of a species I had never come across till then; they had dark blue feathers with a metallic sheen and bright red spots over the eyes; I believe it is a very rare bird; and anyhow it makes an excellent roast. But if that could be called a 'sport' I had never seen a tamer one, and it seemed hardly worth while spending months in pain and discomfort in order sometimes to witness other people catching birds.

Now hawking is an entirely different business when one does it oneself; it was a favourite sport in Turkestan in the Middle Ages, and is so up to the present day. I have only hawked quail personally, and I think it is greater fun than shooting. When the season for quail begins, the natives ride out with their hawks or falcons into the fields of thick, soft lucerne where the quails hide, the horses' hoofs force them out, and then you fly, or more correctly throw, your hawk at the quail, and you have to do it so that the bird of prey shall be able to catch the game. You hold the hawk in your hand as if it were a dart or an arrow, and you have to cast it with the right speed and in the right direction, otherwise it misses its goal. It is all so jolly and gay—the natives in their brightest robes prancing

around on their best horses, the dense velvety grass underfoot, the first touch of autumn in the air; there is such a charming flavour of former ages in the whole scene.

Foxes and even antelopes and wolves may also be hunted in the same way; but for catching game of this order one has to use fairly good-sized eagles. These are not common; good specimens are very highly valued and cost sometimes as much as a horse, if not more. Once when I was going on a trip into the mountains, I asked a native who possessed such an eagle to come with me and carry the bird along in case we found an opportunity for flying it. It was a heavy bird and its owner had a special saddle provided with a wooden crutch for resting it on. For two long days we met with nothing of interest, but on the third day towards sunset something suddenly appeared to move far away at the foot of a hillock. It was late summer; the grass was all scorched into a dull, greyish yellow colour, so that my European eyes were hardly able to detect the moving spot of a slightly different hue. The man at once took off the cap in which the wretched eagle had been sitting blindfold all this time; it turned its head for a fraction of a circle and catching sight at once of the running speck, it spread out its wings and with incredible directness flew straight at its prey. We galloped

along as fast as our horses could carry us, but the whole thing was a failure. The eagle usually alights on the fox's back, the fox turns round to bite it and the eagle pecks out its eyes; the blind fox then remains crushed under its enemy's weight till the hunter rides up and kills it. But this time the fox we expected to catch turned out—as we discovered by the tufts of fur in the eagle's claws—to be a wolf. It had managed to escape, having shown itself more than a match for the poor bird, which we picked up with its legs all bitten. Ventures like this are full of excitement; but as for the poor Ameer's sport, I thought it distinctly dull, no sport at all in fact, compared with that in which his subjects indulge.

Such was Bokhara, with its quaint old ideas and its peculiar mixture of refinement and puerility. A vague hankering after Western habits may make it pretend that it does the same things as a civilized country, but you may be sure that the imitation is always imperfect, the conditions being entirely different. Shooting, for instance, implies neither motion nor aiming nor even guns; a palace bedroom isn't one bit like any bedroom a Westerner might care to use; a band pours out loud sounds though it is unable to read any sort of music; and so forth, up to the cardinal virtues themselves and to the way in which they should be practised.

III

THE PAMIRS

EVERYONE has heard of the Pamirs, and most people believe that mysterious word to mean, in some unknown language, 'Roof of the World'. When, as a child, such scanty information was imparted to me, I was at a loss to imagine how it all looked. Over what country or countries did that roof extend? By what was it propped up? Perhaps, on the contrary, it served the purpose of upholding something—an imaginary paradise of some sort? But then it would be a pediment, not a roof. I felt puzzled and left it at that, for I was secretly confident that the grown-ups who spoke about the Pamirs being the roof of the world had no clearer idea about the whole business than the boy they were instructing. At that time I never thought I should go and see for myself the reality of the matter.

However, eventually I did. Not many people have been tempted to do so, and of those but few have succeeded; a permit for climbing up was

hardly ever granted to anyone. Politically, the Pamirs were delicate ground, and those who were responsible for preventing so-called unrest both south and north of the Afghan frontiers—viz., the British and the Russian military authorities—were never willing to grant to idle travellers facilities of access to a country in which they would only be an encumbrance and possibly a source of complications and friction.

A 'pamir' really means a high rocky table-land. In Asia there are several large pamirs grouped together, some of them in China, the others making up a vast region stretching from Fergana down to the upper course of the Oxus, which forms the north-eastern frontier of Afghanistan. In the latter part of the nineteenth century an international boundary commission granted this region to the Khanate of Bokhara and reserved a narrow strip of territory on its southern side for Afghanistan, thus creating a double buffer, partly Afghan and partly Bokharan, between Russia and the British Empire of India. The whole arrangement was purely artificial. It was the outcome of that strange reluctance which both British and Russian Government offices displayed at the idea of a common frontier in Asia. And this in its turn was mixed up with an exaggerated respect for formulas and sentences: a 'buffer state' was considered the

panacea for all trouble, whereas in point of fact it was the very best way of producing it. As for the River Pandj (such is the name of the upper course of the Oxus in those parts), however broad a ribbon it was made to look on the maps, it was far from being an efficient frontier, and is indeed but a quiet, easily fordable stream. Beyond it rises a mountain range, the slope of which is Afghan, though British military outposts peep over the crest of the chain. On the other hand, the Pamirs are technically part of a province ruled by a Bokharan beg or governor. Owing to the political importance of the place, however, Russia had, in practice, been allowed to have military outposts along the Bokharan frontier; Bokhara was inside the Russian customs-limit, but the Bokharan soldiery were absolutely inefficient, even in the eyes of boundary commissions. As a result of this arrangement, there were never any Bokharans of any kind along the frontier, all authority being merged in the hands of the Russian officers. So if, on the map, it all looked right, and there were as many as two buffer states between India and Russia, in reality the British and the Russian officers were divided merely by a rivulet and a mountain slope which it would have taken a couple of hours to climb and much less to roll down.

When I went there, Lord Kitchener, who was

then in charge of the Indian Army, was inspecting the frontier outposts. I had no idea that we were so close to each other, and we both had a hearty laugh over it a few years later when he told me how he had studied my camp and followed my movements through his field-glasses, being fully convinced that I had come there to spy on him.

The Pandj in those remote regions was for many generations something of a mystery to geographers. Only recent research has traced the whole course of the Oxus up to its sources, which were really fixed for the first time by the late Lord Curzon of Kedleston in his remarkable volume on the subject. The river's lower part, well known through all ages, has been the cradle of various civilizations; but its upper course, the Pandj, has been scantily explored up to now.

Flowing out of Lake Victoria, the Oxus remains a quiet narrow stream for many miles. Then it enters a series of narrow passages between high rocks, the valley widening out again in the intervals. In this way a number of little countries are formed, each being separated from its neighbours by difficult passes along the torrent: Wakhan, Ishkashim and Shughnan are the first three; they lie there far away and secluded from all the world.

Coming from the north, one has first to cross the

Pamirs in their greatest length; the swift-footed mountaineers do the journey from their valleys down to Fergana in twenty-four days, but it is no easy job. The table-land is so elevated and so incredibly barren that it requires a strong heart and a stout one to wander week after week over its desolate wilderness. The Russian soldiers stay there for one year. Each man is first subjected to a minute medical examination, and only those with faultless action of the heart are detailed for this duty. Twelve months later a new detachment comes to take the place of the previous one, bringing with it all that it may require for the succeeding year, from August to August. There is no telegraph line to the Pamirs; and as snow lies on the passes sometimes as late as July and renders them again impassable by October, every precaution has to be taken that the soldiers shall lack nothing for the full year during which they will be so thoroughly cut off from their country that they might as well be in the moon. The usual means of communication during the months when the passes are not entirely closed is the native post—men carrying the mails from post-house to post-house on foot. It is done in that way because fodder for horses is unobtainable all the way, and no horse could carry the amount of barley and hay it would require for its own sustenance during the journey; but a man's food

being much less bulky, carriers can come over with greater ease. As they are mostly ignorant of the Russian script, a feather is attached to urgent messages, meaning 'Let it fly', or in other words, 'Use every opportunity for pushing it through as quickly as possible.'

The question of fodder is so difficult that human inventiveness has full scope for finding substitutes. I once came to a post-house kept by a clever old Kirghiz whose yard was a regular store of ibex heads, some with splendid horns. I complimented him on his marksmanship, knowing as I did what shy game ibex are. He acknowledged having been fairly successful, but added that he had to work so hard under the pressure of necessity, for he required quite that amount of meat for keeping his horses alive through the winter. 'Horses?' I exclaimed. The old man laughed. 'They cannot expect me to grow barley for them here, so they have had to take to the same diet as myself; it suits them to perfection.' The only vegetation one meets with on the plateau are just a few miserable-looking alpine plants which are no good to anyone, except that their roots are easily ignited and are very useful for lighting a fire. The really good fuel is the droppings of previous caravans; dry horse-dung—and still more so that of camels—burns slowly and yields much heat: the roots of the plants

are useful for making a blaze, but they burn down very quickly. What the first travellers did, with no droppings of previous ones ahead of them, is an enigma unsolved by science.

The altitude most of the way is so considerable that owing to reduced atmospheric pressure the temperature at which water boils is very low, and though the kettle be simmering, the tea tastes only just tepid; however long you boil rice it never gets really soft. This rarefaction of the air has other unexpected consequences. The only inhabitants of the rocky plateaux are poor mountain Kirghiz. Though they have lived here for generations, the women, when their time is near for confinement, travel down to a lower altitude for fear the baby should die. It is the same thing with their cattle; unless driven down to another level, mares and cows seldom manage to keep their offspring alive.

Though the altitude of the route is pretty constant day after day, mountain sickness is mostly experienced at certain places and not at others. It is rather a puzzling question. Books on mountaineering commonly attribute the complaint to altitude and to rarity of the air; but that does not solve the problem entirely. The natives on and around the Pamirs call the ailment 'tootèk', and it is a thing of common knowledge that certain places are tootèk-stricken while others, though at greater heights, are

not. After having crossed mountain-passes where the path climbed up a good deal above the height which corresponds to the summit of Mont Blanc (the highest altitude in Europe), I fancied I was immune, and I never gave a thought to tootèk till one wretched night which I spent in a certain post-house. It turned out to be well known as a place where most people fall victims; it is situated lower than many of the other post-houses, but I sat there gasping for breath all through the dark hours, honestly believing I was going to die there and then. One has no option, of course; the horses have to rest at certain places where they can be watered and the distance from one spring or well to the other varies from twenty to thirty miles. The natives believe tootèk to be caused by emanations of gas which issue forth from cracks in the rock. It would be an interesting question for a scientist to solve.

When coming from Turkestan, after having scaled the mountains south of Fergana, one goes on crossing one range after another till at last the great Trans-Alai chain is reached. It is an unforgettable sight. You emerge suddenly on to alpine meadows which in August are one mass of lovely little bright flowers packed close together, and you reach the edge of a slope gently curving down to the Alai valley. Right and left as far as the eye

can gaze the straight parallel lines of valley and mountain-chain stretch on till they vanish in the distance, and opposite you, twelve or fifteen miles away, the huge white range towers up into the sky glittering with snow and ice. It rises so far up that it looks unreal: you feel you ought to shake yourself and wake up, for it is all bound to be a dream. Not just a few little peaks huddled together; but from right to left, for miles and miles and miles, a gigantic saw of dazzling diamonds and crystals going up and up and on and on, with no supplementary half-ranges or ridges in front, against a background of deep blue sky. It seems to be the end of everything, a magic barrier raised up to prevent any mortal from entering the forbidden land beyond. And right down to its base spreads a green carpet of low thick grass, enamelled by flowers in all colours of the rainbow, and cut across by a river, the Surkhab, whose waters, owing to the soil over which they flow, are a vivid brick-red. It is absolutely the fairy-land of childhood, with every detail pushed on to the extreme of its meaning; a vision of a quaint paradise, fantastically unreal, created, with a splendid disregard of detail, by an artist who has used only what strokes of the brush he required. The forbidding glaciers and the idyllic meadow at their feet—nothing else; but, to be sure, every contrast is more powerful with two

component parts only. There is no place in this landscape for trees; as a matter of fact, the lowest part of it lies much higher than the topmost limit of forest-growth, so that there could be neither trees nor shrubs in the Alai valley.

Notwithstanding the colossal scale on which it is built, the place is so attractive that you feel inclined to stay there, to forget the rest of the world and to lead a pastoral life for ever after. I tried it once: I returned for a few days to the enchanted valley just on a holiday trip, merely in order to enjoy the place itself, and I cannot imagine anything more perfect than camping there. It was the same divinely serene weather; the same myriads of tiny flowers stared up at the frozen fireworks of the glaciers. Only by that time I knew that if the friendly masses of ice forbade me to venture farther on, it was all for my good; it was in order to keep me back from the most desolate and dreary desert that is to be found on the face of the earth.

On my first trip, when I crossed the flowery meadow and toiled up for several days by an endless pass in order to climb at last on to the Pamirs, I had to go through a certain amount of deep personal experience before realizing how right was the Genius who erected the stupendous barrier (second only to the great Himalayan range in height) when He spread all possible delights in

front of it, so that no sensible person should be tempted to trespass! It was like the sudden crossing over from heaven to hell; good and evil were placed cheek by jowl, the depths of despair next to the plenitude of joy. No malicious sorcerer, however greatly endowed with power and the most fantastic imagination, could have invented a general scheme better adapted to his incantations. It is the realm of unutterable barrenness and desolation. Day after day you ride through a muddle of absurd rocks all thrown about with seemingly no plan or cause, with no beauty either of line or hue. And when that is over come plains or broad valleys of dull colouring bordered by what look like hillocks; nothing grows there, nothing manages to keep alive for long; the whole place appears to be a sort of lumber-room of the universe, from which everything has been carried off that was of any interest and only the rubbish left behind. It has even no redeeming touch of tragedy, no suggestion of desperate upheaval; it is just a country out of which an incomprehensible curse has stamped all vestige of charm. Peaks which are marked on the maps as tops of very high mountains appear, owing to the insignificant difference of level, to be mere mounds. When at last one comes to a lake, Karakul, it is bitter to an incredible degree and framed by a broad stripe of salt crust. In this kingdom of

vacuity, water itself is unable to breed life.

Hour after hour and day after day, from early in the morning till late at night, one has to trudge on across this horrible waste, and never does one take in any impression of beauty. All the long dreary way over the table-land is alike till one reaches its southern slope along the Pandj. And then at last the tiresome emptiness of the Pamirs recedes into the past and a new world, most extraordinary and charming, unfolds its attractions. For those odd little countries, Wakhan, Ishkashim, Shughnan, Yazgoolem, Karateghin, Darwaz and so forth, are a world in themselves, cousins of the small khanates familiar to the Anglo-Indian officers in the borderland region—Swat, Dir, Hunza, Nagar—and neighbours of those other ones, now incorporated in the Afghan kingdom, like Badakhshan.

The people in these small states are of the same stock as ourselves: they are Indo-Europeans, of Iranian origin. Hiuen-Tsang, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim of the seventh century, who came down from China to India over the Hindoo-Koosh, was struck even then by the quantity of blue-eyed and fair-haired children there, and his remark holds good to this day. The inhabitants of these countries are known as Pamir-Tadjiks and they can all speak the Tadjik dialect, which is a sort of provincial Persian;

but each valley has kept its own language. These languages, now dying out, are closely akin to each other, though each one has its peculiarities which stamp it with a characteristic originality. The people have apparently preserved no tradition nor recollection of a previous existence in a less forbidding home; still, it seems probable that they first developed in more favourable surroundings and, as the result of wars or invasions of which we know nothing, were driven up into these high valleys for shelter and protection. Whatever those vicissitudes may have been, they must have taken place a very, very long time ago, for the idioms of the different countries must first have worked out their peculiarities and then (perhaps in prehistoric times) separated from the Persian stem by which, since then, they have never been influenced. Like most mountaineers, the people are poor, thrifty, hard working, amazingly agile and alert. They are not Moslems, though outwardly they pretend to profess Islam in order not to be meddled with; they are what is improperly called 'Shiahs' in India, or 'Ismailis' in Western books, though both these names mean nothing to them.

My business in crossing the Pamirs was with some of those people, so once I was on the spot, I tried to find out as much as I could about them, the store of printed information on the

subject being scanty. The political trouble which brought me there had arisen owing to the international delimitation having handed them over to Bokhara (or, as they often put it in conversation with me, 'Russia would not have them for her own'). They instinctively feel that they are of the same blood as Europeans. Bokhara to them is abomination, an inferior, debased class of humanity; they call Bokharans 'Manghit', a word of the same origin as our 'Mongol', which to them implies every possible vice. On the other hand, the Bokharans know that the Tadjiks are not Moslems, and therefore they hate them; they are poor, therefore they despise them and think them totally uninteresting; they live secluded in far-away valleys among high and forbidding mountains, the very sight of which makes a Bokharan heart faint. From whatever standpoint Bokhara considers them, they are horrible people. Such a mutual misunderstanding was confirmed by total ignorance of each other. No Bokharan ever appeared beyond the fortress of Kala-i-Wamar, the residence of the Beg of Shughnan, so that whole valleys had never seen a Bokharan at all; as for the few natives who ever came down to the plains, they all went to Russian Turkestan—none ever ventured to Bokhara. The international delimitation had fixed the taxes (in kind) which these countries were to pay

to Bokhara, but had delayed the first instalment for a number of years during which, except for the presence of a beg with a small retinue down in Shughnan, the allegiance to Bokhara had never assumed any tangible form. So when tax-gatherers suddenly appeared and began treating the people as conquered slaves, friction arose, and it was to allay this friction that I went there.

I found charming people, intelligent and genial. The climate in their valleys seems very mild after the severity of the Pamirs. They have orchards and gardens, but their poor little apricots were only ripening in September. White mulberries play an important part in their diet; they dry the berries, grind them and, with a small addition of rye-flour, make excellent flat cakes which are their favourite bread.

What is the past of those highlands? I inquired everywhere for remnants of it, but I looked in vain for any monuments of former days. In various places there are charming legends, but they are all connected with Islam; a ubiquitous tradition asserts that Ali accomplished a series of feats of prowess in those mountains, his deeds rather partaking of the nature of the labours of Hercules. Ali, whose life is well known, never came near the upper Pandj region, so that obviously the local legends were formed in connexion with a national

hero of pre-Islamic days and were turned over to Ali as being the favourite character in the new religion. In one place there is a series of low rocks which obstruct the bottom of the valley; the natives believe them to be the body of a dragon which Ali chopped up into several bits with his sword. There are also ruins of buildings on various mountain-ledges, all so remote from the road which is used now that at least a day would have been required for a visit to any one of them, and I had not sufficient time at my disposal for that; the natives call them 'Kafur-Kala', i.e., fortresses of the heathens. All I could do was to look at them through my field-glasses, a totally unsatisfactory method for gathering any sort of knowledge. At present, having read Sir Aurel Stein's book on his travels in Swat and knowing more than I did then about the itineraries of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, I think that those ruins are perhaps remnants of Buddhist shrines.

One spot lower down the river seemed full of archæological promise—Kala-i-Humb, the 'fortress of the jar'. The local tradition says that Alexander stopped there on his way to India (which seems extremely probable), and that he had a pair of huge jars cut out of stone, for what purpose I do not know. I had heard that one of the vases had been destroyed long ago, but that the other one was

extant. So to Kala-i-Humb I went. It was the residence of a beg—governor of Darwaz, if I am not mistaken. He made elaborate preparations for my reception, and I rode up to his lovely old castle with a whole battalion of Bokharan soldiers lined up on both sides of the road to greet me. Immense mulberry-trees surrounded the place, and during luncheon, which was eaten as soon as I arrived, mulberries were served the like of which I have never seen before or since: dark, red, juicy fruit the size of modern strawberries. Towards the end of the meal I inquired about the jar. For a long time the beg couldn't manage to understand what I meant, but at last he exclaimed: 'That old thing that stood near the bridge? Why, I had it blown up with gunpowder last year in order to repave the road.' I felt murderous. So much so that I preferred to clear out at once, for I knew that if I had to go on keeping up a conversation with that man, I should insult him. I don't believe that my host, who had expected me to spend at least a day or two in his house, ever understood what had happened. The minute coffee was over I sprang into my saddle, and Kala-i-Humb never saw me again. I have never been able since then to see that name on the map without experiencing an awful pang. To think that had I come a year earlier, or had that wretched official waited a year

longer before repairing his road, I might have preserved a relic of some remote epoch, of some unknown art!—whereas now it has disappeared for ever, not only without having been described or photographed, but without having even been seen; for who has taken the trouble to go to Kala-i-Humb since Alexander's day?

Travelling in the Pamir valleys is giddy work. The path often soars up to incredible heights, following, as a rule, the river edge and clinging on to the cliff sometimes thousands of feet above the foaming water. At certain spots the rock is so steep that no path could scale it, and in order to get along, two horrible inventions are used: one is called a cornice and the other a balcony (or 'ovring' in the vernacular). A cornice is a ledge hewn out of the stone where there is no overhanging rock; it is just broad enough for a horse to put its feet on to. One hardly dares to wink, much less to sneeze, for one realizes that the least intrusion of an unforeseen element in the question of balance may mean death both swift and sure. A cornice is especially nasty when it rises so as to turn over a protruding cliff; it apparently leads to nowhere, going off straight into the blue of heaven, and only when you are at the turning-point, with nothing to hold on to, do you see what still lies ahead of you; the suspense just before the turning is very unpleasant. The ovring,

however, is worse. Where the cliff is absolutely like a wall, so that the most attentive eye has failed to detect any anfractuosity to which to cling, men have managed to bore holes (in very slow progression, I fancy) into which they have driven sticks which protrude over the abyss; on those sticks small boards or branches are placed, and the whole contrivance does duty for a road. It is rickety, of course, and swings under the horse's weight; besides, the poor horse, accustomed as it is to carrying bulging loads, is instinctively afraid that whatever is on its back may catch against the wall of stone, with fatal results, so that it always goes along the very edge of the balcony. However, these flimsy feats of engineering have been there since time immemorial and have served their purpose for many generations. The native guides try to prevent travellers from dismounting in such dangerous spots, for fear they may become giddy and fall over; but I never dared to entrust the double weight of myself and the horse to those shaky sticks, and always went over them on foot. The experience is not pleasant, though one gets used to it.

Ovriings have to be repaired occasionally. I was very much annoyed to hear, when I was bent on going to Yazgoolem, that an ovriing which I should have had to cross had just fallen down and was in course of reconstruction. There was fortunately



AN OVRING IN THE PAMIRS



another though much longer route, but that led over the mountains and was not well known, since it was hardly ever used. I was warned that the Odoodi Pass, which was the only road into the country, was very long and covered with snow-fields over a glacier. It was therefore wise to encamp for the night as high up as possible, so as to rise early and to go over the snow before the sun had time to soften it; in certain parts there might be crevices in the ice underneath, and if a man fell through the soft snow into one of them it might be difficult to pull him out. So I made my party get up before the break of dawn, and we performed our several hours' march over the snow in good order. We had a beautiful snow-storm while half-way through, but otherwise no adventures befell us, and towards the evening we reached Motraun, the chief village of Yazgoolen.

Getting out of the country, over the Gooshkhon Pass, was an entirely different matter. The ascent is so steep that the horses can carry no loads; I led mine by the bridle, both of us panting hard, but I never managed to take more than four steps without sitting down for a rest. Once this hard climb is accomplished, you reach a platform just large enough for one horse to stand upon, and so narrow that I sat down there with one foot dangling over one country and the other over the neighbouring

one. Then begins the descent into the second valley. I had been told to wait for the first hour after noon, as one has to climb down a wall of ice by hacking out steps and it is easier to do that when the sun has softened the ice. As it was, one of the pack-horses tumbled down and was killed, and it looked anything but tempting to follow the poor brute; down below, far away, stood rows of rocky needles which seemed to have been put there on purpose to impale whatever fell from above.

In between these two very dissimilar passes, Odoodi and Gooshkhon, both about 15,000 feet high, lies Yazgoolem, like a quiet Arcadia. There are nine little villages in the valley, each one surrounded by fields and orchards. It all looks rather like a prosperous corner of Switzerland. Motraun is the residence of the chief mayor, elected by all the nine villages as head of the country.

The languages of the Pamir-Tadjiks had always interested me intensely, and while living in Tashkent I had at various times picked up in the bazaars men from up there who had come down to the plains to make some money. I had engaged several of them, under pretence of work in my household, in order to learn from them what I could of their languages, customs and legends. There

was one country, however, Yazgoolem, which had evaded all my efforts. Apparently no Yazgoolemi ever left his valley. So when my official duties took me up to the Pamirs I seized my opportunity for going to that particular valley, having a look around, and selecting my teacher.

Unfortunately things took a slightly different turn from that which I had expected.

As soon as I was the guest of the chief, after many mutual compliments and much desultory conversation had been exchanged, I told him that I would be delighted if some one of his people would come down with me to the plains so that I could keep in touch with his charming country. He thought it extremely doubtful, but promised to gather all the people together the next day in order to let me speak to them myself. I knew this was my only chance of securing a man who knew this language, so I was as persuasive as I could be. We spent a long time discussing the matter, but with no result. One boy seemed inclined to accept the proposal, but I didn't think him suitable; he looked a rascal and much too sharp. For learning a totally unknown language what one really requires is a conscientious simpleton whose assertions may be trusted implicitly. There is no way of probing whether the reply to 'how do you say this or that in your own dialect' is the candid truth or a hasty

invention put forward just to get rid of a tiresome question. This rather simple work requires so much attention on the part of an untrained native that during the first few lessons he invariably falls asleep from exhaustion after ten minutes. So I didn't feel eager to annex the adventurous youth. Something, however, had to be done, and as I couldn't go on living in Yazgoolem for ever I decided on the one course left open to me: I would steal what I could not buy.

I chose a simple-minded, open-hearted youngster and entrusted my camera to him. The natives know very well what photos are, and my victim was very proud of carrying about such an important implement. I made him promise he would deliver it into no hands but my own. The custom of all those countries (as is explained in any book about the Indian borderland or the Gilgit road) is that all loads are divided into parcels of equal weight and are born by carriers, horses being no good at that altitude. It is an officially established rule and the men are paid according to a tariff for taking the parcels to the next valley; no village may ever refuse to supply a traveller with carriers. When, therefore, we had mastered the Gooshkhon Pass and were nearing the first village of the next valley, I rode on ahead as if engrossed by other matters, having previously entrusted to my native servant

the fees due for transport. A couple of miles farther down I let my followers catch me up. It was as I had secretly expected: among a crowd of new carriers the faithful Mahmed-Rabee was still marching on and holding my camera. I apologized; but he laughed, saying that he was young and strong and would accompany me to the next halt, where we would spend the night. My trick had succeeded and I had parted him from his own people.

In our new surroundings nobody knew him, nobody cared what might happen to him. Later on he forgave me, and eventually, after he had stayed nearly a year with me in Tashkent, we parted the best of friends; but that first night was very painful. I was obliged to tie him with ropes while he cried and sobbed; the next day he rode a horse with his arms still pinioned. For several days more the situation was strained, till we got so far away that flight was useless. I wrote at once to the old gentleman in Motraun and sent presents to my victim's family, so that in the end everyone concerned was filled with contentment; and in the long run Mahmed-Rabee himself told me I was his benefactor and jeered at his own reluctance willingly to accept an offer of gaining knowledge and seeing the world. He returned to his valley feeling on the whole rather pleased with himself, and quite

proud of all the smart clothes and beautiful presents he was taking home.

The information he imparted about Yazgoolem and its language was much more important than I had expected, and though up to the time of my departure from Russia I was unable to prepare it for publication, I deposited it before leaving my country in the library of a scientific institution, where, I hope, a specialist in Iranian languages may some day make use of it.

I am confident that my act of violence led to no undesirable developments, which shows how easily human standards can be modified by circumstance, and perhaps also how human beings may let themselves be influenced by the moral atmosphere in which they are temporarily placed, without, for that reason, losing their main characteristics. Each climate, each country puts forward its own claims. And that is perhaps one of the greatest charms of innermost Asia: that not only does it unroll an unexpected pageant before the eyes of a Western man, it also adds to his nature; and if he is pliable enough to discard for a while whatever elements there are in him which are averse to his surroundings, he will indulge in new experiments that he may feel startled to remember later on. For what fun is there in remaining rigidly oneself and only registering detached remarks about an alien world?

Is knowledge not more complete when a man partakes of it not only in theory, but in practice as well?

MAZANDERAN

MAZANDERAN

MAZANDERAN is one of the two Persian provinces which lie along the southern shore of the Caspian Sea. In the time of Alexander the Great it was part of Hyrcania, one of the satrapies of Darius's kingdom. The whole of that sea coast is unlike the other borders of the Caspian, and it is equally unlike the rest of Persia. Most of the Russian shore-line is flat, barren, dull, uninteresting, with the one exception of Derbent and of the country around it, which forms the eastern end of the Caucasian range. As for the greater part of Persia proper, it is but a desert over which are sprinkled a number of oases. To this Mazanderan is an exception: it is full of running water and overgrown with dense vegetation. It is an exception, also, when looked at from the sea, and comes as a wonderful surprise to sailors cruising between the dreary rocks and sands of the Transcaspian province on the one side and the grey and empty Mooghan steppe, south of the Caucasus, on the other.

To the student of Alexander's route in Asia, Hyrcania remains an enigma. The hero who had never known reverse was baffled by the dense foliage of Mazanderan; he was obliged to retrace his steps—with what reluctance we may imagine!—and to clear out of the country, for the savage native population, ever present and ever elusive, shot poisoned arrows at his men from under the thick cover of the trees, so that he was never able to lay hands on his enemies. This atmosphere of seclusion and mystery which hovered over Hyrcania in Alexander's time has survived in a certain degree up to our own days. Hidden away between a high mountain range and a treacherous and inhospitable sea, with desert both east and west, it enjoys but scanty intercourse with the rest of the world. It has practically no roads, and I do not remember having ever seen a cart or any sort of conveyance with wheels in the country. Transport is invariably performed by pack or caravan.

The forests which cover the mountain slopes store up moisture all through the year, and the innumerable rivers, rivulets, streams, brooks, etc., which flow down into the sea are never dry, so that when following the main path along the coast, travellers are obliged continually to look out for a ford where they can safely urge their mounts into the water. The highest peak in the mountains is snow-capped

Demavend; its lofty summit is ever present, rising in the background of most landscapes like the Fujiyama of Japan. Lower down, the hill-slopes are clothed with forests, mostly composed of beautiful old trees, some species of which are unknown to the flora of Europe. I saw them in May, when many of them were still in bloom; there was a particularly attractive one, belonging to the acacia tribe, covered with bunches of lilac flowers, which I have never met with elsewhere. This dense vegetation goes down to the very sea-shore, so that even the sand dunes are overgrown with wild pomegranate, its masses of coral-red blossoms turning the beach into a regular garden.

The villages have no streets, but are formed of farms loosely grouped together. Each house is surrounded by an enclosure planted with clusters of orange and lemon trees, and in May the scent of their flower-laden branches was nearly too strong to be pleasant; wherever one went the air was so full of this insistent perfume that one always felt on the verge of a headache. The peasants' huts, under high thatched roofs, are invariably perched on brick platforms with a wooden staircase or ladder on one side. This is done to prevent snakes from getting into the rooms, for not even in the tropics is there such a snake-ridden land. Of all sizes and colours, from little swift black ones to huge fat lazy pinky-

beige abominations, there is no end to the varieties swarming all over the place, and probably dangerous ones are in the number. Another pest are the wild boars which breed in the forest and appear at night to trample the rice-fields and devastate the kitchen gardens. The natives will neither eat their flesh (as it is pork) nor even touch their carcasses when killed; still, they are grateful to foreigners if any of them come over the hills from T'cheran to shoot these enemies.

I went to Mazanderan by steamer, landing in a small seaport called Meshedesser, the terminus of the Russian boats plying from Transcaspia. It was like falling on to an unknown planet; everything was the reverse of what I had left behind me. Coming from the Transcaspian province, that wretched barren desert where life is only possible owing to the energy of man, I had suddenly drifted into a lovely park, luxuriant and varied, where, on the contrary, the one objectionable sight was man: backward, wily, hostile, with none of the childish charm of tropical natives. A striking illustration of the people's slackness was afforded by the cargo of the boat, which consisted largely of bottled lemonade. It seemed so ridiculous to bring all that spurious beverage, made in Astrakhan of goodness knows what refuse-heap lemons (if not solely of chemicals), to a country where real lemons were as

common as pebbles; but there it was: the Persians wanted their lemonade to be fizzy, so that they might think they were drinking something nearly like champagne and feel rather naughty in the process.

Meshedesser is the port of a fairly large town called Balfroosh, and to me Balfroosh was the nearest centre of interest during my stay; but to reach it meant a good four miles ride, and that over a road which was a mere path through orchards, rice-fields and woods.

Meshedesser (I had looked it up in a book) was the proud owner of a telegraph station, so I went at once to investigate how it worked. I found a nice little bungalow in the midst of fields outside the village, and a jolly, talkative young man in charge of the place. I asked him in what language I could forward a message. 'In any language,' he replied. 'Capital!' said I; 'but do you know them all?' 'Why should I?' he retorted. 'You give me your text in Persian and I wire it to Teheran. There it is translated into the language of the country for which it is meant and then wired over in the new version.' I felt doubtful about the success of the proceedings. But, after all, you never know; so, in order to see what would happen, I wrote out a telegram in Persian. Four or five days later I returned to the telegraph office and inquired

whether there was any reply to my message. My friend the clerk was dumbfounded. '*A reply!*' he exclaimed. 'Why, the telegram you sent is only just reaching Tcheran at present.' How it ever reached even that place is a mystery to me (unless it was carried by hand—a two days' journey); for later on I saw the telegraph wire stretching through the forest and over the hills, tied, without insulation, to the trees, and I wondered what good it could be. Anyhow, I saw it was no use fussing, so I made up my mind to wait. Sure enough, one night a fortnight later, there was a telegram awaiting me at my house. I hurriedly opened it. It was totally impossible to decipher what was written on the form. It was too late to go to the telegraph office, which was far away, so I went round to the nearest mosque, where I had made friends with the mollahs, learned and venerable old gentlemen, and asked them to help me to make out the text. After long discussions about the right way of placing diacritical points, each one of them read a different version; but none of their glossaries conveyed any probable meaning. So I said: 'It cannot be helped. I'll go round in the morning to the telegraph clerk and ask him what he meant when he wrote those hieroglyphics.' At that the audience burst into laughter. 'The clerk!' they shouted; 'why, this is the first message he has

registered since he has been in office. He is in the bazaar by now and dead drunk; he won't be sober for a week.' I left the place without seeing him again; but many months later, when I was back at home, I inquired whether any wire from Persia had ever been received, and I was shown the telegram which had been carefully put aside for me to explain: there was my Persian text written out in Latin letters, a perfect puzzle to everybody concerned. Such are the mysterious and rather unpractical workings of a Persian telegraph.

Meshedesser can boast of no hotel, so I looked about for lodgings and thought I would take a house for a few weeks. I found one which had stood empty for a long time. It was all by itself in a garden where the trees at that moment were one mass of blossoms; there were two rooms in it besides a kitchen. It belonged to an old man who owned a shop in the bazaar, and I went to ask him whether he would lease it to me, and at what price. He listened to my suggestion with a lack of enthusiasm which was barely polite and quoted a monthly rent equal to an average yearly one—fully four pounds sterling. I expostulated and reminded him of hospitality towards strangers, which is a common law in the East; but the horrid old thing did not even maintain the usual florid urbanity of his race and calmly replied, staring me in the face,

that if I lived in his house he would require a compensation for the fact that my presence there would render the place impure and therefore uninhabitable. As I wanted the premises at once, I had to yield: he got his exorbitant rent.

Having settled down I began roaming about the place with a camera and taking snapshots of all I saw around me. I realized that the people resented this practice, though they knew perfectly well what I was doing. I thought, however, that their objection to photography was based on the disapproval every good Moslem ought to feel towards any image of a living creature; and, as I knew that the whole of Persian art is a stubborn protest against the stiff orthodoxy of the Koranic faith and that it has managed through all the ages to portray under various pretences not only animals but even human beings, I did not attach much importance to the disapproval I felt in the air whenever I produced my camera. Then one day a man told me he knew why I was making pictures of his country: it was in order to cast a spell over it by way of magic incantations in which my photographs would play a part. My innocent snapshots were looked upon as witchcraft! It is easy to imagine how unpopular the wizard was making himself in the eyes of the crowd. However, the quiet rural population never rose in arms against the impure proceedings.

Not so the townsfolk of Balfroosh, who once made themselves quite unpleasant about my photography.

I had discovered a farm in the neighbourhood of that city where a family of Polish Jews was settled. They bought up cotton from the villagers and exported it to Lodz. They had told me that the great Shiah festival called Shakhsay-Wakhsay was going to take place in three weeks' time, and that we were just then going through the period of forty days' fasting which precedes the holiday. This festivity is held in commemoration of Hassan and Hussein, sons of the fourth Caliph, Ali, who perished in their fight against the Sunni Caliphate; it is reverence for the family of Ali and hatred of its persecutors which is the main doctrinal discrepancy between Sunnis and Shiahs. Every Friday during the period of fasting an episode of the drama is acted, up to the last day, when a procession is formed to mourn for the extinction of the house of Ali (who was husband to Mahomet's daughter, Fatmà). The Friday performances are produced by those who are going to impersonate the historical characters in the procession; they are, in fact, regular dramas, and remind one of mediaeval mystery plays. The actors are dressed up as Arabs and read the parts they have to utter, holding sheets of paper in their hands.

The text is composed beforehand and always identical, so that there is no improvisation about the words. In the West, the performances at Oberammergau would be the nearest thing to the Shiah production.

Having gathered all this information, I rode to Balfroosh on the appointed Friday in hopes of catching a glimpse of the play. I had only one man with me, a groom to look after the horses.

When I reached the meidan, an open square surrounded by the bazaars, I came upon a wonderful sight: in the middle, on a platform, the actors were busy with their performance, and all round them thousands of spectators on roofs and terraces were intently following the drama. It was about four o'clock and the rays of the sun were no longer unbearably hot; the general aspect of the scene made me think of one of those ancient theatres whose beautiful ruins we admire in Greece or Sicily, where, too, the show was produced in the late afternoon with a blue sky for ceiling and the natural surroundings for background.

I rode up rather near to the crowd, handed over my horse to the groom and unslung my camera. I had not yet opened it when wild shouts from the audience made me look up: a troop of youngsters armed with sticks was rushing at me. To face them alone and unarmed would have been madness,

so I fled, seeing no other alternative. I ran like a hare, turning and twisting in a maze of unknown crooked little streets. I had no plan except that of gaining time, for only a miracle could save me. And the miracle happened: I met one of my Jewish friends, who took in the situation at a glance. He seized me by the arm, opened a door into which I sprang, and we at once used all the fastening contrivances we found on the door panels in order to keep out the crowd. We were in an old abandoned caravanserai; its strong mediaeval gate with huge locks and bars would have withstood a siege; the stone walls were in good repair; the roof, as chance would have it, was detached from its neighbours, the house being surrounded by narrow lanes which turned it into a separate block. Having closed and locked the door we ran round to ascertain whether there existed any other entrances; fortunately there were none. Then we explored the roof. The yelling fanatics were trying all the time to force our gateway, but nothing short of gunpowder would have breached it. They went on howling and shrieking, but that was all; their efforts to break the solid panels with stones and even with beams were of no avail. We hid in a corner near the top of the house. It had been used as a place for rearing cocoons and unwinding raw silk, so that the putrid smell which these operations invariably entail per-

vaded the whole place to an extent which may have explained its abandonment till natural ventilation had again made it apt to house some other sort of goods. For a long time we sat huddled up near the roof. By degrees the noise of the angry crowd subsided, till the approach of dinner-time at last drove the remnant of my aggressors back to their homes. After everything had quieted down we still waited for the darkness of night, and only then crept cautiously out into the open. Eventually, by roundabout ways known to my saviour, we reached the farm in time for supper with his family. My groom had been clever enough to go straight there with the horses, so that I was able to ride back at once to Meshedesser none the worse for my rather narrow escape.

This first experience of the local fanaticism did not, however, deter me from attempting to witness the Shakhsay-Wakhsay procession. I knew it might be dangerous, but I did not feel I could miss this unique opportunity of seeing a ceremony the description of which had haunted my early school-days when I read about it in a book on the religious pageants of the world. Up to the particular year in which I visited Balfroosh, there had always been two processions, starting from the two important mosques; but the previous year this arrangement had led to an encounter between the two crowds at

a crossing of the ways, and as neither was willing to wait for the other to pass, a regular battle had ensued in which forty men had lost their lives. The governor of the province was dismissed for not having prevented the massacre, and his successor managed to amalgamate the two processions into one, by providing that it should assemble by turns in each of the two places of worship.

On the eve of the holiday I rode to the farm of my friends and asked them to put me up till the morrow. Incidentally I inquired at what time of day the procession usually moved out. One of the brothers at once replied that it was at eight; but I saw a terrified look in the eyes of my other host, who began contradicting the first and asserting that he knew it never started before noon. So at five in the morning, before anyone had stirred, I put on my clothes and slipped out of the door. One of the brothers, seeing me crossing the field in front of the house, ran after me and implored me to keep quiet; he thought I was sure to be murdered in that hotbed of unbridled fanaticism. I told him in reply that anyhow no responsibility for what might happen would be laid at his door and that nothing could prevent me from doing as I pleased.

So I walked into the bazaar and chose the spot where two main streets cross each other at right angles, surmising that the pageant was sure to

advance along one of them. I posted myself, unobtrusively, as flat as I could possibly manage, against a wall.

I knew that this function is renowned for the number of men who honour Hussein and Hassan by striking themselves with swords in order to resemble the martyrs at least in the quantity of blood they shed. They shave a broad parting across their heads, from forehead to nape, so as not to get their weapons and the wounds they inflict with them entangled in hair. Most of the smart young men are therefore the proud bearers of scars on their foreheads rather similar to those which many German students have on their cheeks. It is generally believed that if a man dies from these self-inflicted wounds he may be sure of immediate hospitality in Paradise.

While I stood firmly adhering to my wall, the people around me were attending to their breakfast and to their festive toilet. All those who were going to join the mourners were slipping on white cotton gowns and sharpening their broad cutlasses. They insulted me in every possible way, but I never moved in reply. They gathered round me and whetted their knives under my nose, screaming all the while that their steel would first do away with the infidel dog before it touched themselves. I tried to turn my whole being into a statue which

neither heard nor saw nor understood. I kept my eyes staring far away above their heads, so as not to meet their angry glances; I never let my face twitch at their most scathing insults; I never uttered a sound. And that turned out to be the right policy, for no one touched me and I saw the whole procession pass at a few yards' distance.

There were all the historical characters dressed up in Arab clothes, mostly on horseback, though there were also many on camels. Fatmà was impersonated by a little girl who, as she was not yet of a marriageable age, could appear with her face uncovered. After the historical part of the ceremony had gone by, there came a double row of fanatics in white calico turned crimson by blood; their heads were uncovered and they kept hammering on their foreheads with their blades, streams of blood flowing down over their faces and clothes. Fond fathers and brothers ran next to them, trying at each blow to insert sticks between knives and skins so as to save their relations from what looked like certain and speedy ends. The self-butcherer crowd yelled: 'Ya Muhammad, ya Ali' at the tops of their voices, all in unison and to the rhythm of their march. I counted one hundred and ten of them. It was an unforgettable scene of brutal savagery, those endless rows of howling maniacs, looking as if flayed alive and slowly progressing

under the scorching blaze of an Asiatic summer sky. About noon it was all over and I at once ran back to the farm of my Jewish friends, who were greatly relieved at my reappearance.

Though both the ancient Hyrcania and the modern Mazanderan are renowned for their savagery and difficulty of access, the country had its period of glamour, when culture and refinement suddenly sprouted forth on its fertile soil and covered it with a network of beautiful buildings, some vestiges of which are still extant. That period was the reign of Shah-Abbas the Great, late in the sixteenth and early in the seventeenth century. This gifted and enlightened monarch was the son of a lady who, born and reared in Mazanderan, remained a staunch admirer of her birthplace and induced her son to visit it. She appears to have possessed a remarkable personality, and was of an artistic temperament; her influence over her son is well known, and notwithstanding the seclusion of the harem and the prevailing lack of information about the part women played in the life of Moslem countries, the mother of Shah-Abbas has left her mark, in art if not in politics. Ispahan was the capital of Persia in her day, and the city owes most of its beauty to her son; but there are monuments there which are still shown as having been built by 'the Shah's mother'.

When she induced her son to go to Mazanderan, whither she probably accompanied him, he was entranced by its beauty and decided to come every year and spend the hot season in this land of gardens and flowing water. In order to do so, he built himself a number of palaces in various spots. But after his death in 1628 his successors, who had not the same reasons for taking an interest in that particular province, probably found no time to go there, and the princely residences remained uninhabited till about thirty years later, when the celebrated Cossack chieftain and brigand, Stenka Razin, who from an ordinary highwayman rose to be a political power, twice came over the Caspian Sea with his fleet and raided the country. Shah-Abbas's palaces were plundered and wrecked. And now they stand, like beautiful ghosts of the past, half ruined and very much overgrown by creepers and shrubs. In various nooks amongst the brickwork there are still remnants of lovely tiles, and the general plan of some of the houses is not difficult to reconstruct. They are hidden away in different corners at present, not always easy of access, and testify that Shah-Abbas had a keen eye for the picturesque and followed a true artistic disposition in blending landscape and water with his dwellings.

In one of the old palace gardens there is an artificial lake and a bridge on pointed arches leading

to the ruins of a small pleasure-house hidden away under huge trees on an island in the middle. One can hardly see the water around, so thickly is it covered by a growth of water-lilies, hundreds of white flowers staring up through the sheet of flat glossy leaves. There is still an old, old gardener in that enchanting garden, and he pretends to be looking after the place and keeping it in a kind of relative order. When I suddenly came upon him, he was squatting on a path amidst high heaps of water-lilies, which he was sorting and cutting into slices. He told me he did this in order to make a medicine out of them, and I wondered what ailments it would cure. Was it, perhaps, going to be an extract of the subtle magic I felt all round me, a drug which would unconsciously permeate the minds of those who would stroll into that garden, making them see, through the beautiful old arches with their patches of blue enamel, that evanescent charm of former days which it is hard to fancy, so scanty are the relics they have left, half-buried and half-forgotten, in this remote wilderness among the jungles of Mazanderan?

TRAVELLING IN CENTRAL
ASIA



TRAVELLING IN CENTRAL ASIA

THROUGH many ages Turkestan has been crossed from end to end by wayfarers of varying degrees of distinction. Marco Polo is the best known European to have ventured there, and he did so as early as the thirteenth century; but innumerable travellers, from both West and East, have toiled over its mountains and its plains, covering immense distances and spending years of their lives on the journeys. Nowhere in the world has the 'traveller'—and not merely the 'invader'—played such a part in local life as in Asia, and that is perhaps why the rules of hospitality are more elaborate and more precise on that continent than anywhere else.

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century the influence of modern methods of travel was on the whole very slightly felt thereabouts; and this, for anyone taking an interest in the past and fond of imagining how vanished epochs looked, was perhaps one of the chief elements of its charm. I left the country before it was invaded by the motor-

car. In the way of modern appliances, the railway and the steamer were still considered more or less of novelties; they had altered the everyday life merely along the narrow strips of land bordering their routes, the rest of the provinces remaining addicted to their ancient ways of travelling.

Steam locomotion resulted, of course, in a flood of cheap manufactured goods pouring all over the bazaars, and also in a rabble of adventurers who came like swarms of locusts to settle on the old patriarchal world. The railway opened up a possibility of export, and this created new industries, such as large-scale cotton-growing, which entirely upset the former systems of cultivation and husbandry.

But to the superficial observer at a day's distance from the railway line or from the Oxus (the only river on which there was a regular steamship service), those modern and hurried methods of progression were in nobody's mind and all the local traffic followed the customs of bygone ages. I was the first to bring a motor there. The railway train was known to the natives as *otash-arba*, 'the fire cart', but my motor was at once nicknamed *sheitan-arba*, 'the devil's cart': with no reflexion on myself, I trust—merely on the inventor.

The *arba* (without a prefix) is a cart with two wheels of incredible height supporting a wooden

platform with rigid shafts all in one piece. Those huge wheels are required for going across country and for spanning the innumerable little irrigation canals, over which they roll with scarcely a jerk. I never understood why the axles were not better oiled than they are, for the screeching of an arba in motion is heard a long way off. The natives never sit; they always crouch, being able to do so as easily on a field and even on a cart as on a floor, and they travel crouching on the platforms of their arbas. It requires a good deal of practice for a white man to do the same without acute suffering. On the whole the arba is a slow method of progression.

A faster one is the usual springless Russian tarantass, the conveyance used on all the high-roads of Russia. It is very swift, very supple, and in case of accident very easy to repair. The hood (usually without a seat inside it) is placed on long poles which do duty for springs. In order to make their tarantasses as elastic as possible, people often cut down young poplars and replace a broken pole in that way. There is a story according to which a man upon getting home was so sick of his rickety old tarantass that he thrust it into a ditch, and there it stayed; later on a number of young poplars sprouted up out of it and became large trees. It may be true; anyhow, it is a well-chosen illustra-

tion: you can expect anything from poplars; they are planted simply by sticking bits of branches into the soil; if you make a mistake and stick the piece of wood in the wrong way—head downwards, so to say—it will grow nevertheless, but the trunk will be uneven, all in bumps and waves. Inside a tarantass the traveller reclines on his luggage, which is best packed in bags or soft wraps, rigid portmanteaux being kept behind under cushions or pillows to prop up his back. It is a very comfortable way of travelling and I have sometimes covered hundreds of miles at one stretch in such a vehicle, driving on day and night, merely changing horses at the post-stations, and with just an occasional stop for a bath or a meal.

Once, however, I travelled in a tarantass in still more leisurely fashion. I was coming down to Turkestan from Western Siberia and the local authorities had assured me that I could shorten the way and save much time by going across the steppe and catching up the postal road lower down—that is to say, by covering one side of a triangle instead of the other two. I should, they said, meet Kirghiz tribes, who would be in a certain part of the steppe at that particular season, from whom I should be able to hire horses; but as a matter of fact I never met any Kirghiz camps at all, or only just small groups of tents where the people invariably said that

their horses were grazing many miles away. So I drove on slowly for day after day with the same horses, stopping continually in order not to tire them out. It was great fun, and I saw a large stretch of steppe where I believe no white man had ever wandered before. I had a certain amount of provisions with me, such as rice, biscuits, dried apricots, tea and sugar; the rest we supplied by shooting game, which was plentiful all the time. Besides the two coachmen, I had with me a friend and a Russian servant, and there was always enough for everybody. We shot the most wonderful birds, such as I had seen only in books, and sometimes we came to lakes swarming with all kinds of water fowl. There were days of arid desert, and days of thick grass covered with flowers; no roads of any description; just a general notion of going south according to the compass.

Occasionally we met Kirghiz tribes on the move, riding camels and horses with the felt tents tied up in bundles and all the household goods in large carpet saddle-bags. Once, towards sunset, I met a Kirghiz lady demurely riding a camel all by herself over the steppe. The camel in Central Asia is of the so-called Bactrian variety; it has two humps and the rider sits fairly comfortably between them, propped up fore and aft. The Kirghiz women are of a ruddy complexion, their faces broad and flat,

their eyes narrow and slanting, their noses round and small; still, they are not displeasing, and with their healthy look and merry humour they are on the whole a rather successful type of womankind. Their clothes are decidedly picturesque; they wear immensely high head-dresses of snow-white linen tied with coloured ribbons and decorated with beads. The solitary camel-riding lady was very fine to look at. Her shaggy, well-fed camel stepped majestically and superciliously over the steppe; the lady rocked slowly in unison with his motion, as smart as any Kirghiz lady I ever saw. From her red leather top-boots to the important medals dangling on her neck and her coif, she was the very embodiment of all the masterly Turanian hordes, a queen of the steppe at her best.

To ride a camel in the right way it is better to have been born a native of Asia. White men never look quite at their best on that absurd mount; there is something in the method of catching up its swaggering motion which is always unattainable unless you are born to it. A good deal of experience, also, is required to feel at once what is serious in the brute's whims and what may be ignored. Then there is the question of their smell, to which we cannot get used: a caravan of camels at rest is a perfectly unbearable neighbour during a night in the open.

A donkey is a different thing, and that is the animal which most natives ride: patient and enduring, it trots about all day long. In no country have I seen such darling little asses as in Turkestan. Why they should have a bad name for obstinacy, I was always at a loss to guess. You see them staggering under loads larger than themselves, under which an obstinate animal would simply lie down and refuse to go on, whereas I have never seen a donkey act in that way. I have often seen, on the contrary, two stout natives riding the same little ass, with baskets of provisions tied on both sides as well. The society of protection for animals made up its mind to do away with such odious ill-treatment of the poor beast. But none of the natives ever joined such an institution, and it was invariably a European who would stop the donkey and try to make one of the men get down. Such proceedings filled the natives with amazement. 'Why are you meddling?' they used to say. 'The ass is mine, not yours. This is no business of yours.' It was hopeless to make them understand. The classic part played by Asiatic donkeys is that of leading caravans of camels. The donkey steps out as number one in the 'kafila', the first of the camels being tied to his tail. The admirable behaviour of such caravan-leaders once more contradicts the reputation of donkeys, which I consider

to be entirely wrong. There is, however, one drawback to the animal: its habit of braying at night. A friend of mine had to live at one time in a small town where asses were plentiful, and he couldn't sleep for the braying, till he found out that the beasts cannot bray unless they lift up their tails. So he went round in the evening and tied bricks to the tails of all the asses in the immediate neighbourhood, and in that way he managed to have a few quiet nights. But the donkeys soon found him out and would not let him come near them, and the natives became suspicious of his nightly intrusions.

The favourite animal in Central Asia is the horse. Even for a white man, if he cares about other people's opinion, it is safer to ride than to walk. The smart thing is to ride a stallion, but with the great number of mares all around, that is not practicable. There are very fine horses in the country, the most original breed being the Turcoman. The tribes which are called by that name have been a terror to the peaceful inhabitants (chiefly of Persia) for many generations; in Morier's delightful *Hajji-Baba* a raid of Turcoman brigands is even made to come as far south as Ispahan. The Turcoman horses little by little developed amazing qualities of endurance and swiftness, and rumour asserted that when on the war-path the Turcomans fed them with a mess of barley and mutton-fat, the

same as they ate themselves; they used to fill their saddle-bags with this stuff, dried and pressed into lumps the size of tennis-balls, and the horses were trained to have such food handed over to them by their masters in the saddle and to munch it at full gallop. With the Russian conquest and the pacification which, after the fall of the Turcoman stronghold of Ghéok-Tepe, ensued in 1883, the nomads could no longer use their horses for the traditional purpose of raiding their neighbours, and the famous Turcoman breed was threatened with extinction. In order to save it, the Russian Government created two studs in different spots on the steppe, and magnificent specimens of the old breed went on being produced; they were eagerly sought for by the well-to-do natives and there were special races and prizes for the preservation of their distinctive qualities.

Among the common horses of the country there are two varieties of 'amblers'. One has the usual swinging gait resulting from the front and hind leg on the same side moving in unison; the other a very swift and even motion half-way between walk and trot, the animal placing each of its four hoofs separately in rapid succession. With both of these kinds of ambling, large distances are easily covered without ever breaking into a canter or trot. I had a very strong horse which could go in that way for

hours, and I rode several times to a picturesque village called Koomsan at the foot of the hills fifty miles away, covering the distance in a day.

I once had a rather striking proof of the endurance of these steppe horses. I was in Kooshk, south of Merv, near the Afghan frontier, and it bored me to go back by rail; besides, it was in those remote times when passenger trains on the Transcaspian line ran only twice a week; so I thought I would take a ride along the border and then go up across the steppe to Tedjen, which is a railway station. It was early spring. The steppe was covered with fresh grass dotted all over with enormous tulips—and not only dotted, for in some places the tulips grew so densely that from afar you saw what looked like huge scarlet ponds. I rode from one Cossack outpost to the next, changing horses at each. The spring showers were rather a nuisance, especially when they turned into steady downpours which lasted for hours. One night, when we were late and not yet within reasonable distance of our prospective shelter, there was a tiresome protruding bit of Afghan territory which had to be circumvented by following all along the frontier line so as not to trespass. We had no dealings with the Afghan authorities, and a Russian caught in Afghanistan would probably have been sent over to the prison in Kabul. However, in that

dark, rainy night I was confident that the Afghan sentries would be snugly asleep in their barracks, so I risked it and rode over a good stretch of their land. Fortunately I met no one, or there would have been a fearful row. At my last Cossack outpost I wanted to strike up due north towards the railway. The Cossacks said it couldn't be done, as there was no road; the only way was to ride along the border till I got to the Persian frontier and joined the road from Meshed. In my saddle-bags I had an excellent staff-map on which a road over the steppe was marked. The Cossacks made fun of me and said that they had been living there for years and that if there had been a road, they would have known of it. Feeling sure of my map, I said I didn't require any of them to guide me; I only wanted their horses, for which I would pay them; I also wished to know whether the horses would carry me the whole distance in one day—apparently over sixty miles. They said they always did it in two days by the roundabout way, but that their horses were strong. So, map in hand, I led the cavalcade, and sure enough at the right spot I found a faint vestige of a Turcoman track which brought us straight to Tedjen. It was a long day; we started at daybreak and arrived late at night.

A curious feature of the steppe at that moment were the tortoises, whose breeding season it was.

Little round yellow humped shells covered whole square miles of ground, so that the horses couldn't always find available space for putting down their feet and slipped over the animals. The females, much larger than the males, sit quietly blinking while the males fight each other. The fighting consists in one tortoise trying to slip its shell under the shell of an adversary, if possible on uneven ground and from above, so as to turn the enemy over by a sudden jerk: once on its back a tortoise is unable to turn over again and can do nothing but die of hunger. Meanwhile, all concerned hiss violently, so that the air is full of this hum, which is more subdued than that of the cicadæ. It is a curious picture of spring-time animal life.

This steppe, which goes down both to the Persian and to the Afghan frontier, is part of the Transcaspian province. It is a most desolate region: nearly all of it waterless and barren. There are about a dozen Russian villages in the hills, where engineers have been able to find enough water for irrigating a few fields; the rest of the land is overrun by Turcoman nomads or is empty waste where no water has been found, even by digging down to great depths. The capital, Askhabad, a sandy, dusty place, is much more like Northern Persia or the Eastern Caucasus than like Turkestan. It is full of Persians from Meshed and of Armenians and

Tartars from Baku. Just as in the Caucasus, the local cabs are 'phaetons' and are drawn as a rule by excellent horses in pairs; a cab in the local vernacular is therefore called a 'phaeton'. They are used to any sort of drive and are always willing to start off anywhere without notice: over the Persian border, into the heart of the desert sand-dunes, or off to the Caspian Sea. No unexpected order elicits the slightest astonishment in the driver, who is invariably a Persian. The horses are very often grey or white and are always adorned with strings of blue beads against the evil eye; very often the manes and tails are tinted with henna, so that the horses look as if they had stepped out of a Persian miniature.

The horse bred on the plains is excellent on even ground, but not so good at climbing. The mountain pony, on the other hand, is a wonderful climber; riding him on difficult rocky paths you have a feeling that he has fingers to his hoofs and that he clings to the cliffs like a monkey. It is, of course, not easy to supply oneself with the right sort of mount for every kind of country, for Turkestan is so varied that one may sometimes be obliged to go, on the same steed, over Pamir-ovrings and tiger-ridden jungles. The horse which carried me over Odoodi and which I dragged up over Gooshkhon brought me down to the plains, where

we suddenly had a whole day of travel along a narrow path through thick rushes, in a tropical heat. The rushes were so tall that the head of a man on horseback only reached half-way up the stalks; with that, the wall of closely packed stems between which the path wound its way was so dense that any wild animal emerging from it would have been upon you before you had time to be aware of its presence, and the natives asserted that there was a tiger in the immediate neighbourhood. The only thing was to put one's trust in Fate, and I plodded along all day—and an incredibly sultry day it was—with this constant danger against which I could take no precaution, till at last the limit of the rushes was reached and the village appeared where I was to spend the night. It was very tiresome to feel so powerless against a possible attack, but the contrast of those low, burning, marshy plains so soon after the snows and glaciers on the mountains was very striking and most typical for Central Asia.

Wherever I travelled in Russian Turkestan the atmosphere I met with was friendly and genial. The natives are always ready to offer the heartiest hospitality; a European never feels any hostility towards himself, not even any ill-bred curiosity. Twice only I remember having met with difficulties. The first time was in a place called Langar. One often comes across this name, which means 'anchor'

and is used either in the singular or in the plural; a certain distortion of the latter form has produced the name Lenkoran, which is that of the old port on the Caspian half-way between Baku and Enseli. It is a very ancient appellation and may perhaps have meant 'rest-house', in the sense of 'anchorage for travellers'. A friend of mine, a Russian officer who had covered much ground with regimental scouts, had told me there was a Langar in a certain part of the khanate of Bokhara, where he had seen a mosque covered with the most beautiful tiles and practically unspoilt. On my way back from the Pamirs, returning up north from the Oxus to Samarcand, I was studying my map on one occasion when suddenly I saw the name of Langar attached to a village some fifteen miles inland from one of the post-stations. The temptation was not to be resisted, though I had very little time at my disposal, for the Governor-General, knowing how difficult it was to get me back once I had gone away, had briefly mentioned that he considered I could go to the Pamirs and back in fifty days. There is no telegraph up there, so that I had been unable to correspond with Tashkent since my departure; but, as chance would have it, I expected to be back on the forty-eighth day: I could therefore devote one day to Langar and still be in Tashkent before the appointed time. And

just then it happened that at the post-station there were no fresh horses: I should have had to wait anyhow for half a day. At once I rushed to the neighbouring village and hired a horse from one of the natives. When travelling on horseback it is very important to have one's own saddle; but my things were well packed, and as I didn't want to unpack and repack in this God-forsaken hole, I rode on the saddle they gave me. Unfortunately it was an instrument of torture which it took me a long time to forget. Anyhow, as night was falling I reached Langar and managed to find shelter till morning with deeply amazed natives who had never seen a European before in their lives.

Early next day I walked up to the mosque. There it stood, a simple whitewashed building, on the top of a hillock. But where were the tiles? I had inquired before riding there whether it was a more or less celebrated shrine to which pilgrims came in numbers, and had been told that it was the burial-place of a very great saint who had many devotees all over the country. This had sounded rather encouraging; so perhaps the tiles were inside? As I was walking along the path towards the entrance, one of the sheikhs of the mosque, a forbidding-looking person, came forward and stopped me rather rudely, saying that the mosque was closed and that I could go no farther. His whole demeanour was

permeated with the (fortunately unspoken) conviction that I was an unclean dog whose mere proximity meant defilement. No argument was of any avail, till I remarked that the mosque could not always be closed: when would it be open? 'Not to-day,' he said; 'I only unlock it when I have had a vision at night, a message in my sleep from the saint, telling me to do so.' 'Then it's all right,' said I. 'Such a great saint must know that I am a fervent pilgrim come from afar and quite prepared to bring an offering to his shrine. Go home and concentrate; you are sure to have a vision telling you to unlock the door for me. I will come back in an hour's time.' An hour later all doors were unlocked and I entered into what turned out to be an empty square hall, whitewashed like the outside, with just the saint's tomb in a corner. Very much puzzled I again hoisted myself on to that beastly saddle and rode back.

After new delays which were beginning to make me nervous about the day of my return, I was driving along on the next evening when I noticed a building glittering in the distance under the glow of sunset. I asked the driver what it was. 'A mosque', he replied, 'in a village called Langar.' That was probably the Langar my friend had spoken of. But, alas! I never saw it; for in order to get to it I should have

had to turn back, spend the night at the nearest station, and devote most of the next day to riding to the place—and what if it had been a wrong Langar again?

The other time when I had difficulty with natives was in the mountains on the Chinese border north-east of Kooldja, the Tian-Shan range. Speaking more correctly, the Tian-Shan is not a range but a number of parallel ranges; the central one, a huge chain of snows and glaciers, with the peak of Khan-Tengri for chief summit, acts as Russo-Chinese frontier. All the mountain-land up to this line, across which there are few passes and those very difficult ones, is in the Russian district of Prjevalsk. I had some time at my disposal and had discussed with the district officer a plan for going up the Tian-Shan in hopes of shooting *ovis Poli*. There was a valley at the foot of the central range about which two Kirghiz tribes were at daggers drawn, both claiming equal rights to pasture-land; and until the quarrel should be settled, the authorities, in order to prevent an open feud, had forbidden both sides to encamp there. In consequence the wild animals had it all to themselves. There I went with my brother, a number of natives, a Russian servant of my own, a Russian huntsman from one of the villages, and, as interpreter, a semi-civilized native, a petty official from Prjevalsk.

The Kirghiz in that part are a tribe known as Kara-Kirghiz, meaning 'black Kirghiz', a much more troublesome and querulous race than the Kirghiz in the plains, who call themselves 'kazak' and are delightful people. A great fuss was made of us, a local chief even offering me his son for a groom. After a three days' climb we reached the valley, and I saw numbers of heads of dead ovis Poli: the silly animals fight each other and get their horns so firmly locked that they are unable to release them, and in this way condemn themselves to die slowly of hunger. I saw a number of these pairs of heads still closely united in death. But as for the living ovis Poli, what with the excitable natives who start shouting hysterically the minute they see one, and what with the wild turkey which swarm in that region, no sport was possible. The turkeys live just under the snow-line and are so similar in colour to their surroundings that it is most difficult to detect them before, with tremendous noise, they fly off and warn the ovis Poli of approaching danger. I never even shot at an ovis Poli, though I once counted eighty-two heads as a herd passed before my field-glasses, flying off in a panic produced by the beastly turkeys. The natives are confident that the two species, the bird and the quadruped, have a special arrangement between them for ensuring their mutual safety.

We managed, however, to bag some ibex, which was our only comfort—and eventually our only food, for the little we had brought with us had been devoured and we had only our rifles to rely on for the replenishment of our larder. Once, after a succession of failures, we were compelled to sacrifice a horse and to eat it. The valley lies high up above the line of forest-growth and therefore there are no trees—not so much as a shrub. I was obliged to send men down to a lower level in order to bring up twigs and logs for fuel. I had also to send a messenger to Prjevalsk to fetch bread for the men and a pair of boots for myself, mine being already in holes. I expected this messenger to return in four or five days, but more than that elapsed and the men began to grow sulky at having no bread. Then the other fellows, who had gone down for fuel, returned with the news that they had come across brigands who had caught my messenger on his return trip from Prjevalsk and had kept him prisoner; they had also attempted to lay hands on the fuel-bearers, but these had managed to run away from them. I at once set off with all my people to deliver my servant. The very next day we found the brigands. We came upon them unawares, attacked and defeated them, and I held the chief in bondage. He was a well-known Kara-Kirghiz headman. I tied him with ropes, carried

him down to Prjevalsk, and delivered him into the hands of the authorities. At night, when he thought we were all asleep, he tried to bribe my men with promises to set him free.

That was not my only experience of Kara-Kirghiz manners. I had bought, somewhere in the country, a very pretty nagaïka with a silver handle. The nagaïka is a whip, very seldom used actually for striking, composed of a stick for handle and a leather thong the same length as the stick. You hold it so that it hangs behind your leg and the leather just tickles the horse's side, which is sufficient for keeping up the animal's energy; if you stick the nagaïka into your pocket, your horse at once becomes lazy and half-asleep. One day, somewhere high up in the mountains, the natives of a sudden whispered excitedly that there were ibex close by. I jumped off my horse, seized my rifle, and, not seeing my groom anywhere about, left my horse for him to find; the nagaïka I deposited across my saddle. After that I spent a long day in stalking over precipitous cliffs (looking at them afterwards in cold blood I could hardly realize I had actually crawled up them). In the evening, upon returning to camp, I claimed my silver nagaïka. The groom denied ever having seen or found it. As he was a chieftain's son I believed him, thinking him a gentleman. I returned next morning to the

spot where I had left it; we looked all over the place but found nothing. Later on I saw the interpreter holding an angry discussion with the groom, till the latter eventually burst into tears and brought back the missing object. He had hidden it in the rocks in order to return there—a three days' journey—and keep it for himself, after I should have left. Such are Kara-Kirghiz chiefs and their sons, even in their dealings with a guest.

The last animal to be mentioned in a description of means of transport in Turkestan is the yak. It is only met with at great altitudes and is used for crossing the highest passes, as no amount of snow, no winds, no storms seem to have the slightest effect on it. It is an ox or huge buffalo, but with something of the elephant about it, and it has long hair which hangs in fringes down both its sides nearly to the ground. It is a kindly, placid, stolid animal: a mere glance at it is enough for you to see that it is thoroughly reliable. Baby-yaks are charming; they are such clumsy, playful beasts, rather like gigantic puppies when they romp. As for curds made with the cream of yaks' milk, they are delicious to eat and have a taste all their own. I have never ridden a yak because I have never had to: this very slow method of progression is only used when it is necessary—chiefly for crossing difficult passes where no other animal is able to

compete with it.

Central Asia is a dry country and most of its rivers never flow into anything, being used up for irrigation and ending in fan-shaped networks of canals; nevertheless there are some peculiar modes of travel by water. Up in the mountains the Tadjiks cross the torrents by means of inflated goatskins on which they sit astride. They sometimes build rafts of such goatskins with a framework of poles upon them. In the Pandj region this is a very quick way of going downstream. I once tried it in Wakhan and reached Kala-i-Wamar in about two hours, whereas my pack-horses took the whole day to get there by the riverside path. It is a giddy business. The foaming, precipitous waves make the raft spin round and round like a top; you sit on your luggage, with half a dozen swimmers all about you holding on to the raft; they are there to see that the goatskins are tight, and as soon as one of them gets limp one of the swimmers unties the cork and inflates the skin again with his breath. They have to be at it constantly, and it all goes on amidst the noise and dance of the rapids. It is original, but not particularly safe.

Then, on the rivers down in the plains, caiques are used, or, as they are called there, caïooks. These are of various sizes. I once hired a caïook on the Syr-Daria (Yaxartes) and floated down into un-

inhabited lands on a little exploration trip. It was a nice, steady boat, and it used to be tied to a pole at night, while I slept on a felt mat under the stars. There were no mosquitoes, no dangerous insects; the whole of nature seemed there to have been made in order to help, not to deter, and I hardly ever came across human life of any sort. There were ruins of former buildings at certain places, but all of Moslem times, and on some days Kirghiz encampments appeared not far from the river; but that was all. I don't remember having met anyone on the water for days and days. For the night one had to settle carefully at some distance from the river, which is ever washing down its banks. One bank is always like a low cliff, standing up some ten to fifteen feet, and the stream is perpetually undermining it so that large lumps of the loose soil are constantly falling into the water with a loud noise. I remember one night when a regular cannonade went on for hours. If one lay down too near the ridge, one might risk waking up half-drowned. Owing to this softness of the earth the river has changed its course over the steppe ever so many times; it meanders about, forming islands and peninsulas, and though there are hardly any trees anywhere, the landscape is charming.

On the Amoo-Daria (Oxus) the caïooks are of a much larger type. They ply up and down carry-



AMOO DARIA



ing goods to the various markets along the river. They can only be secured as a rule at the terminus points and are not available at intermediate stations, as I once learnt much to my annoyance. It happened in the following way. The Governor-General had promised me that if he ever went to Khiva he would take me there; the place is far off and I was eager to see it. Some time later he insisted on my joining the Foreign Office, so as to be appointed his diplomatic adviser, and I was spending a dreary summer of apprenticeship in St. Petersburg when I suddenly got a wire: 'Going to Khiva; catch me up.' I at once asked for three weeks' leave and took the train the next day to Chardjui, where the Transcaspian railway crosses the Amoo-Daria. It was early in August and the water was at its highest, owing to the action of the July sun on the glaciers. The railway bridge over the river is about a mile and a half long, and in the summer the swollen river flows down with great swiftness, its chocolate-coloured waters churning and tossing. At Chardjui I learnt that the Governor-General's steamer had passed down two days before. My only hope of catching it was in a caïook; but there was no caïook to be had, owing to the fact that Chardjui was not a terminus. Everyone in the place told me that the only thing to do was to wait for the ordinary weekly passenger-boat, due three

days later, which might perhaps carry me downstream in time. This was of no use whatever; I knew it would be too late.

Then I suddenly remembered having had to deal with Ural Cossacks settled close to Chardjui. By trade they were fishermen and therefore had boats. I rushed to them at once. They go about the river in long narrow flat-bottomed canoes, rather like those used by natives in tropical seas: such canoes hold two men who row by turns. I hired two of these 'boodarki'. We tied them together and I got in with three Cossacks, taking some provisions—mostly melons and biscuits. The distance from Chardjui down to the place from where you ride or drive on to Khiva is over three hundred miles. The current was so strong that my men were afraid of rowing in midstream, especially when it was windy and the waves threatened to swamp us. We worked by turns and stopped at night to sleep on land. It is desert all the way. Every time we saw a Kirghiz tent, which was very seldom, we visited it in order to buy fresh food. For four days and nights we floated down, a strong north wind often detaining us. At last, when only fifteen or twenty miles remained to be done, we saw the steamer returning. With a heavy heart I went towards it, climbed on board, joined my friends, and spent the rest of my holiday with them. To

go on down alone was out of the question. I had missed all the pageant of the Governor-General's reception, and anyhow it was impossible to improvise on the spot the necessary orders for my journey, not to speak of the risk of my having to wait very long for a more comfortable way of getting back. So I had to make up my mind to see Khiva another time.

The Turcomans make very good sailors. I had once to spend two days in Krasnovodsk, the terminus of the Transcaspian railway on the shore of the Caspian. It is a miserable place, picturesque enough when you approach it from the sea, with huge red rocks overhanging the white houses, but with no fresh-water supply. A plant has been erected for boiling sweet water out of salt water, and there is even a square, planted with tamarisks and other wretched-looking shrubs which are irrigated with the surplus water from the plant. Having spare time ahead, I looked for a sailing-boat, and Turcomans offered to take me about in one of their galleys—for such, after all the small river craft, it looked to me to be. It was one of those large boats with a high deck and tall masts in which they trade along the shores of the Caspian. This is a treacherous sea, often similar to the English Channel at its worst, but at that particular moment in May it was all azure and sunshine. Once, however,

returning towards sunset over a perfectly calm sea, a terrific wind suddenly struck the sails; all the small boats, oars, ropes, etc., that were on deck were swept away into the waves in no time, and we danced hopelessly about for two hours before we were able to anchor in the port. I saw then what steady sailors my Turcomans were. They remained orderly and efficient throughout; no one lost his head, and, though things had looked rather dark at first, all ended well. Afterwards a man was tied to a rope, thrown into the water, and the things which had been washed overboard were all redeemed; nothing was missing.

Such are the various modes of locomotion I have practised in Central Asia. New ones have surely been introduced since I left the country: motors, for instance, which are so easy to use there in the plains. But whatever may be their means of journeying, I sincerely hope that future travellers will be able to gather in that country the same impressions which I enjoyed. However distant from Turkestan my life has been for the many years since I last saw it, I have never been in any region whose charm is so potent. Nowhere is life so enchantingly easy, nowhere is nature so friendly. There is no atmosphere of unknown dangers, as there is in the tropics, no tiresome artificiality, as on the Riviera. The climate in winter is just cold enough to forbid the

invasion of palm-trees (which invariably look so wretchedly out of place in European gardens), and the general background formed by an ancient Moslem civilization makes a wonderfully attractive frame for the life of white men, if they take an interest in it. Everything is permeated by an exquisite old culture which has built monuments of refined beauty and has left its imprint of politeness and good manners on all around. Wherever you go you may hope to find remnants of an elegant art scattered among landscapes which blend the highest of mountains with luxuriant and well-tilled plains. Each season has its own charm: for who should decide whether a hot summer afternoon in a thick cool shady garden full of the cooing of doves is more enjoyable than a November morning with the apricot-trees one mass of pink and coral and a minaret towering over them against a clear blue sky? Or whether a mountain valley, secluded and remote and full of flowers, is better than a limitless emerald green steppe with myriads of bulbs pushing their blossoms up over the grass? The longer one stays in Turkestan, the more delightful it is to study the country and its inhabitants, and if some day it is reopened to civilization, it is sure to yield no end of information and enjoyment to those who will take the trouble to explore it.



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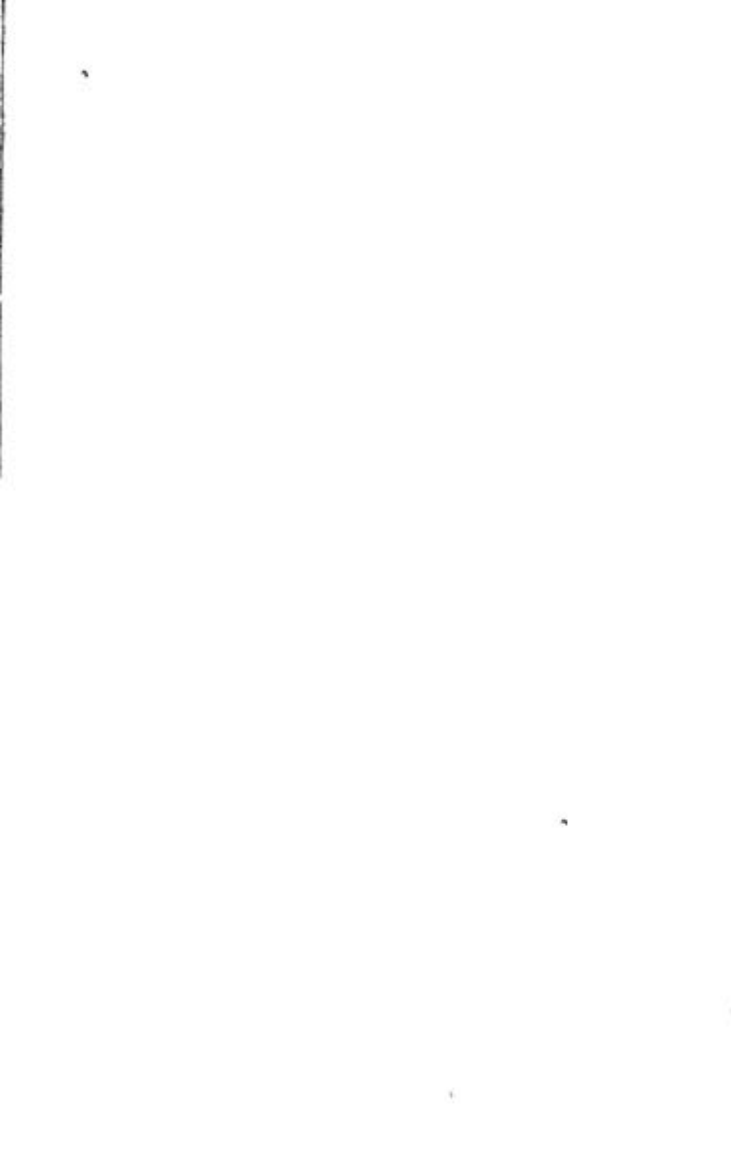
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